

PORTFOLIO COMMITTEE NO. 5 - REGIONAL NSW AND STRONGER COMMUNITIES

Thursday 1 September 2022

Examination of proposed expenditure for the portfolio area

MULTICULTURALISM, SENIORS

CORRECTED

The Committee met at 09:30.

MEMBERS

The Hon. Robert Borsak (Chair)

The Hon. Lou Amato

Ms Abigail Boyd

The Hon. Greg Donnelly

Ms Sue Higginson (Deputy Chair)

The Hon. Shaoquett Moselmane

The Hon. Peter Poulos

The Hon. Penny Sharpe

PRESENT

The Hon. Mark Coure, *Minister for Multiculturalism, and Minister for Seniors*

* Please note:

[inaudible] is used when audio words cannot be deciphered.

[audio malfunction] is used when words are lost due to a technical malfunction.

[disorder] is used when members or witnesses speak over one another.

CORRECTIONS TO TRANSCRIPT OF COMMITTEE PROCEEDINGS

Corrections should be marked on a photocopy of the proof and forwarded to:

**Budget Estimates secretariat
Room 823
Parliament House
Macquarie Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000**

The CHAIR: Welcome to the public hearing of Portfolio Committee No. 5 – Regional NSW and Stronger Communities and its inquiry into budget estimates 2022-2023. I acknowledge the Gadigal people of the Eora nation, who are the traditional custodians of the lands on which we are meeting today. I pay my respects to Elders past, present and emerging and celebrate the diversity of Aboriginal peoples and their ongoing cultures and connections to the lands and waters of New South Wales. I also acknowledge and pay my respects to any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people joining us today. I welcome Minister Mark Coure and accompanying officials to this hearing. Today the Committee will examine the proposed expenditure for the portfolios of Multiculturalism and Seniors.

Before we commence, I would like to make some brief comments about the procedures for today's hearing. Today's hearing is being broadcast live via the Parliament's website. The proceedings are also being recorded, and a transcript will be placed on the Committee's website once it becomes available. In accordance with broadcasting guidelines, media representatives are reminded that they must take responsibility for what they publish about the Committee's proceedings.

All witnesses in budget estimates have a right to procedural fairness according to the procedural fairness resolution adopted by the House in 2018. There may be some questions that a witness could only answer if they had more time or with certain documents to hand. In those circumstances, witnesses are advised that they can take a question on notice and provide an answer within 21 days. If witnesses wish to hand up documents, they should do so through the Committee staff.

Minister, may I remind you and the officers accompanying you that you are free to pass notes and refer directly to your advisers seated at the table behind you. Finally, could everyone please turn their mobile phones to silent for the duration of the hearing. All witnesses will be sworn prior to giving evidence. Minister Coure, I remind you that you do not need to be sworn as you have already sworn an oath to your office as a member of Parliament. I would also like to remind Mr Michael Tidball that you do not need to be sworn as you have been sworn in at an earlier budget estimates hearing before this Committee.

Mr MICHAEL TIDBALL, Secretary, Department of Communities and Justice, on former oath

Mr JOSEPH LA POSTA, Chief Executive Officer, Multicultural NSW, sworn and examined

Ms MELINDA NORTON, Director, Disability Royal Commission, Disability Reform and Seniors, Department of Communities and Justice, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: Today's hearing will be conducted from 9.30 a.m. to 12.45 p.m., with a 15-minute break at 11.00 a.m. We are joined by the Minister in the morning. In the afternoon we will hear from departmental witnesses from 2.00 p.m. until 5.15 p.m., with a 15-minute break at 3.30 p.m. During these sessions there will be questions from the Opposition and crossbench members only. If required, an additional 15 minutes will be allocated at the end of the morning and afternoon sessions for Government questions. Thank you for your attendance today. We will begin with questions from the Opposition.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Welcome, Minister, Mr Secretary and senior officers joining us today. Thank you for coming along. I wish to start with some general questions, if I could, Minister, just to set a context for some of the questions that will follow over the course of the morning. Minister, what's your understanding of the approximate number of seniors in New South Wales?

Mr MARK COURE: First, I begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the lands on which we meet today and pay my respects to Elders past, present and emerging. The number of people in New South Wales over the age of 60 is around 1.9 million, approximately 22.5 per cent. For those aged over 65, it's just over 1.4 million, which is around 17 per cent of the New South Wales population. That is, of course, an increase of just under 1.5 per cent since 2016.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Of course, that number of 1.9 million is the number for 2021, which is reflected in *Ageing Well in NSW: Seniors Strategy 2021-2031*, as you would know. That figure of 1.9 million is probably creeping up a little bit. I just note that the population of South Australia is 1.8 million, so we've got more seniors in the State of New South Wales than all of the citizens of the State of South Australia. Minister, have you been given a detailed briefing on the Australian Institute of Family Studies report—I just show you a copy of it, so you've seen it. You may have seen it, but this is my question: Have you been provided with a detailed briefing on the Australian Institute of Family Studies *National Elder Abuse Prevalence Study: Final Report* that was released on 22 December last year?

Mr MARK COURE: I don't think I have, but I will check with the department.

MELINDA NORTON: Not that I'm aware. Certainly not this calendar year while I've been involved with the portfolio.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: May I just press a bit further on that? Are you aware of the report, Minister? Has anyone mentioned to you what everyone's referring to as a landmark report, commissioned by the Commonwealth working with the States, into the issue of elder abuse in Australia?

Mr MARK COURE: I am aware of the report.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: So you're aware of the report.

Mr MARK COURE: That's correct.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: I might add the report is readily available. In fact, it's over 320 pages long. In summary, it's a survey done over a period of time of 7,000 seniors, approximately one-third of those from the State of New South Wales. Following on from your answer, you would therefore not have been briefed about the elements of the report that deal with the matter of elder abuse in New South Wales?

Mr MARK COURE: Correct.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Are you concerned, Minister, that you've not been fully briefed on such a seminal and significant report, which is recognised as such around Australia, by the secretary or other senior officers of yours?

Mr MARK COURE: Mr Donnelly, can I just answer that question? As you are well aware, of course, in 2016 a Legislative Council inquiry into elder abuse occurred. My opening remark, of course, is that I condemn all abuse, neglect and exploitation in any form. As Minister for Seniors, my priority is to ensure seniors in New South Wales have access to the best possible services across government. We've taken a proactive approach in this space since 2016.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: I'm well aware of that inquiry, Minister, because I chaired that inquiry.

Mr MARK COURE: I'm aware of that.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: I stand to be corrected but, as I understand it, New South Wales was the first State or Territory in the Commonwealth to undertake an inquiry into the specific issue of elder abuse. Minister, at the budget estimates hearing on 14 March this year, in answer to a question regarding your role as Minister for Seniors in New South Wales, you said:

As Minister for Seniors, my priority is to ensure seniors across New South Wales are safe, have access to the best possible services and are able to live happy, fulfilling and healthy lives.

That's a description of your role. I gather you stand by that description of your role as the Minister for Seniors.

Mr MARK COURE: I do indeed.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Minister, how would you describe your ongoing working relationship with the NSW Ageing and Disability Commissioner, Mr Robert Fitzgerald?

Mr MARK COURE: In terms of Mr Fitzgerald, I've got a very good working relationship with him. I have met him on a number of occasions during the course of the year, both meetings in my office and I visited the commission a couple of months ago, in Parramatta. He is part of, of course, a monthly meeting I have with senior peak bodies in New South Wales.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Following on from that, your description, using your phrase "very good", do you respect the opinions, judgements and advice given to you by Mr Fitzgerald on matters to do with seniors in New South Wales?

Mr MARK COURE: I do. I want to, just if I can, put on the record the wonderful work the commission does. As we know, the commission has responsibility for a range of issues, at the end of the day to safeguard the rights of older people and adults with a disability, living in their home and community. It's one of the reasons why it was set up. I do have a very good working relationship with the commissioner. I was only recently with him a week or two ago at a seniors' forum in Port Macquarie.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Sorry, Minister, to interrupt. The issue of a working relationship is not my question. I will just repeat it. Do you respect the opinions, judgements and advice given to you by Mr Fitzgerald on matters to do with seniors in New South Wales?

Mr MARK COURE: I do, yes.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: How highly do you respect the opinions, judgements and advice given to you by Mr Fitzgerald on matters regarding seniors in New South Wales?

Mr MARK COURE: Very, very highly.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Thank you. Minister, can I take you to excerpts that I'd like to read to you, if I could, please, Hansard transcript extracts from the budget estimates hearing on Tuesday. I've got that transcript here. I want to specifically cite particular extracts from Portfolio Committee No. 5's examination of—

Mr MARK COURE: Is this last Tuesday?

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Yes. For the proposed expenditure for Families, Communities and Disability Services. Please bear with me. If I could just read the particular excerpts because my questions follow from the excerpts, but I will cite the pages. These are statements and comments and reflections from Mr Fitzgerald on page 47. I will just quote them. They're all Mr Fitzgerald's quotes:

I think, if I can just use that as a segue—and the secretary won't be surprised—the issue of resourcing of the commission in attendant activities is of serious issue, as you are well aware. Just the history of this is important to understand. The indicative budget prepared by DCJ was for \$29 million over a four-year period. Before I arrived, it was cut to \$13.6 million over a four-year period, as the legislation was going through Parliament. As a consequence of that, the commission has not been provided with a budget that's adequate to undertake the statutory functions.

I go on. There's a couple more quotes:

But going forward, there's an immediate cut of 25 per cent to the budget of the ADC at the end of this financial year and a 40 per cent reduction against anticipated demand, which has been agreed by Treasury and DCJ. The financial position of the commission is precarious and has been so for some time.

It goes on further down the page:

The indicative budget was \$29 million over four years and it was cut, before I arrived, to \$13.9 million over four years. Had the budget that was prepared by DCJ been upheld, we would be in a very good financial position relative to the demand that we've seen over the last few years. But a cut of 60 per cent before you open the doors means that you can never recover from that.

It goes on:

But fundamentally there's a deficit. The deficit has been coming and there's a financial cliff—which I've used many times—at the end of this financial year.

Just two more references if I could. It goes on the following page, page 48, and going to page 49:

So we've had seven Ministers who jointly administer our Act in the last three years. There's no doubt at all that we've raised these concerns consistently with all Ministers, as you would imagine. This has been a foreseeable problem ... Nevertheless, we've been unsuccessful in all budget bids so far. Not a single budget bid has gone up, but the secretary is taking this matter up at the moment.

That's acknowledged. Further:

I've indicated to the Government very clearly that in relation to the commission's core budget the commission will be unable to fulfil its statutory functions to the extent that is expected by Parliament unless the budget is fixed.

Finally:

If the current budget is sustained as it is, it'll be a 40 per cent reduction in our capacity to deal with people through the helpline, community support functions, through investigations and through community engagement. Because we're a statutory agency, there is nothing we can do—not a single thing. Because the original budget was cut, there's actually no fat left in the organisation because it was taken out before we opened ... This is a story that we've done privately—

I presume he's talking to Ministers and officers before—

with the Government for now three years. It is a matter that we've raised in each and every budget bid. We worked with Treasury and Finance in DCJ to come up with a demand funding model, which is used in other parts of DCJ—and, again, that was unsuccessful.

Finally:

It's the same message that it's been to you and everybody else. I'm very open about this. It is not possible to maintain our performance in relation to the statutory functions into the future on the budget that's now predicted.

Mr MARK COURE: Sorry, Mr Donnelly. Can you repeat the paragraph before that last one. I just missed what you were just saying then—he was saying. If you can just quote that last paragraph again.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: No. I'm quoting specific paragraphs to you—

Mr MARK COURE: I realise that. I didn't hear the last—there's a sentence there you—

The Hon. LOU AMATO: He missed the sentence.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: It reads:

It's the same message that it's been to you and everybody else. I'm very open about this. It is not possible to maintain our performance in relation to the statutory functions into the future on the budget that's now predicted.

Minister, they're very forthright statements made by the commissioner, statements that have been made—clearly, from his explanation—over a period of time. We're talking about some of the most vulnerable people in the State—seniors and those with disabilities. What is your response to these comments, once again made most strongly and fervently by Mr Fitzgerald on Tuesday?

Mr MARK COURE: Thank you, Mr Donnelly, for that question. I saw parts of the Ageing and Disability commissioner's appearance on Tuesday regarding his future funding. The commissioner and his team, as I mentioned before, do an incredible job. You can see that in the annual reports. As I mentioned before, I visited his office in Parramatta and have seen the work that they do, firsthand. I've also met with him on many occasions, as I mentioned in my previous answer, to discuss the issues affecting seniors and the work of the Ageing and Disability Commission.

In terms of the budget, I'm advised that the Ageing and Disability Commission has adequate budget in this financial year of 2022-2023 to meet operational requirements. There are ongoing discussions between the Ageing and Disability Commission and the Department of Communities and Justice regarding the future funding arrangements of the commission. I have personally spoken to Minister Maclaren-Jones—I've also spoken to the secretary as well—about the importance of finding a good outcome here. I will do what I can, as Minister for Seniors, to ensure that the commissioner can do his job in future years. These discussions are active, and I will not let them stop until we reach an outcome. Maybe the secretary of the department might want to add to my response.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: No, I've got some further questions to you, if I could, Minister.

Mr MARK COURE: Sure.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Minister, this has been a significant issue, not a minor issue, in the mind of the commissioner, effectively after he commenced in 2019, with respect to—and I won't go back and read it—the differential between what he understood would be the effective annual budget allocation for the operation of the commission and in fact what it commenced at, a significant lesser amount. I could read other quotes, but he

is absolutely clear that the commission has been operating with this fundamental pressure since then of that significant reduction in the money that he understood was going to be provided to the commission and what has been the expansion of the work done by the commission. When one gets a statutorily appointed individual like the commissioner saying, "We're facing a financial cliff", it doesn't get much clearer than that. Are you saying that you're satisfied with your own answer that you're continuing to work with other Ministers to resolve the matter? Is that your answer to this issue?

Mr MARK COURE: And the secretary as well. As I said before, there are ongoing discussions—these discussions are live and they are active—between the Ageing and Disability Commission and the Department of Communities and Justice regarding future funding arrangements for the commission, and I have personally spoken to the secretary along with Minister Maclaren-Jones about the importance of finding a good outcome here. I will do everything I can, and what I can do—I will do everything I can as Minister for Seniors to ensure that the commissioner can do his job in future years, and these discussions—

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: What about the current financial year?

Mr MARK COURE: I am advised that there is adequate budget for the financial year of 2022-23 to meet operational requirements.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: By whom? Who has informed you of that?

Mr MARK COURE: I believe Treasury, but let me just confirm. I might have the secretary provide an answer.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: No, Minister, you are only here for a short period of time.

Mr MARK COURE: I realise this.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Who has advised you, as the Minister for Seniors, that there is adequacy in the budget allocation for the operation of the New South Wales seniors and disability commission?

Mr MARK COURE: My understanding is Treasury, but I will ask the secretary of the department to provide a further response.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: No, no, I accept the answer that it is Treasury. I understand that if that's your answer, that's your answer. Minister, do you know what the size of the expenditure of the New South Wales budget is this year—the total budget? Just approximately.

Mr MARK COURE: I've got the budget papers in front of me.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Sure. It is not a trick question. It is \$114.9 billion of expenditure in the New South Wales budget. With a budget of that dimension and size—which the Government, which you are a member of as a Minister, are very proud of announcing as the budget expenses, what they are doing to fund a range of programs across the State—how can it possibly be the case that since the establishment of the commission and successive years and successive strong advocacy by no-one less than the commissioner, we have still in 2022 going into 2023 the commissioner saying that the place is going off the cliff, basically? He can't do his job. The commissioner can't do his job. How can it be, with a budget of \$114.9 billion, we can't fund such a fundamental organisation protecting the interests of seniors and people with disability in this State?

Mr MARK COURE: I repeat my answer, but I will also add, if I can, that whilst I was not the Minister at the time when the initial budget of the ADC was being determined, let me say this. As Minister for Seniors, I will do everything I can to ensure that the commission can do its job in future years. As I have said on three separate occasions, I have already spoken to the secretary of the department along with Minister Natasha Maclaren-Jones to ensure we find a good outcome here.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Have you rung the Treasurer?

Mr MARK COURE: Sorry?

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Have you rung the Treasurer and had a conversation with the Treasurer about this problem?

Mr MARK COURE: I have spoken to the secretary and I have spoken to Minister Natasha Maclaren-Jones about the issue.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Have you spoken to the Hon. Matt Kean, the Treasurer, about this very serious problem in this very significant and important agency in this State?

Mr MARK COURE: My understanding is those discussions have occurred.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: No, my question is have you spoken to the Hon. Matt Kean, the Treasurer of New South Wales, about this diabolical problem that this important agency is facing in New South Wales?

Mr MARK COURE: Look, perhaps my office has—

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: No, Minister, you know the question.

Mr MARK COURE: Minister Natasha Maclaren-Jones has perhaps.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: I've asked have you.

Mr MARK COURE: I speak to Treasurer Matt Kean on a regular basis.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Have you spoken to him about this matter specifically?

Mr MARK COURE: I understand my office has spoken to his office.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Minister, please, it's a straightforward question. Have you, as the Minister, well aware of this fundamental problem, spoken to the Treasurer about this issue?

Mr MARK COURE: As you know, Mr Donnelly, funding decisions are Cabinet in-confidence. It is not appropriate for me to discuss in full—

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: So the answer is no, okay. We'll come back, but the answer is no. Thanks, Minister.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Minister, launched on June 29 this year, the NSW GROW pilot program, the \$3 million investment by New South Wales helping new migrants and refugees in western Sydney find new opportunities in the Murray and Riverina regions—just on that, have you or your department ever worked or looked into programs to provide migrant communities with opportunities to build their own places of worship, like temples, or cemeteries?

Mr MARK COURE: I'll probably, if I can, allow Joseph La Posta to answer that. But I just want to, if I can, briefly talk about this program as a matter of introduction. This is an exciting program and, as you know, I was at the launch at Leeton. As we know, we've seen an increase in migration from the city to the regions over the last two years, particularly since the pandemic, and, as we know, Sydney is growing. There are opportunities for a lifestyle in regional New South Wales. You are right, I did launch the Growing Regions of Welcome pilot program with the Deputy Premier during Refugee Week in June, and this program is being driven by the New South Wales co-ordinator general of settlement, Professor Peter Shergold, and my agency for that matter.

In recent years Multicultural NSW has been working at a grassroots level to build the capacity for small regional towns to attract and retain refugees and migrants living in Sydney who are keen to move to country areas, and the launch of this program is very, very significant, particularly in times that we have seen at the moment where there are skill shortages in our regions and throughout not just New South Wales but throughout Australia. The two events that were held in Wagga Wagga and Leeton officially launched this program connecting refugee and migrant jobseekers living in western Sydney with employment and lifestyle opportunities in regional New South Wales. In regards to the second part of your question in terms of places of worship, I personally haven't, but that doesn't mean that my agency hasn't received, you know, email or notifications from community groups out there.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Is it something, Minister, that you think would be beneficial to—

Mr MARK COURE: Absolutely, absolutely.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Great.

Mr MARK COURE: And if I can just get Mr La Posta, he might want to add a few things to my response.

JOSEPH LA POSTA: Good morning, Ms Higginson.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Good morning.

JOSEPH LA POSTA: The essence of the pilot is fundamentally about helping the Syrian and Iraqi cohort that largely reside in Fairfield, Cumberland and that Liverpool area to help connect them to regional areas where there are potentially skill shortages, employment opportunities, demand. The connection piece, which you've touched on in part, which is places of worship and feeling safe and secure, is equally about the employment side of things with our newest Aussies in question, but equally about preparing those townships around all of the ecology, for want of a better word, that they need to help make sure that they are welcoming places. In terms of

those townships and regional hubs the Minister mentioned before in the Albury and Riverina area, a part of it is about making sure that there is cultural appropriation for their religious practices and these sorts of things. A good example of that in the township of Walla Walla is a lot of those fleeing the conflicts in Syria and Iraq are Christians and there are connections to the Lutheran Church and other things that are down there as well. A part of the connection process is about understanding their religious needs as well.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Are you aware of the Yazidi community in Wagga Wagga?

JOSEPH LA POSTA: Yes.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: As we understand it, there are about 1,000 people in that community. They've raised with me issues around accessing therapy to address some of the severe trauma that most of the community members have experienced. One of the key concerns that has been raised was to do with something as simple as translators and how they have actually not been allowed to nominate their own translators for counselling and therapy sessions. This is in spite of the fact that there are, apparently, accredited translators within their own community. Some have actually attended sessions for help where the translator is an Arabic speaker, not a Kurmanji speaker. Are you aware of these issues and, if so, what are we doing? It's one of those compounding the problem rather than addressing the problem—

JOSEPH LA POSTA: Ms Higginson, firstly, it's an excellent question. One of the challenges from the Syrian-Iraqi conflict was the speed at which the Australian Government and the New South Wales Government had to stand up its own approach to supporting the Yazidis communities and any of the persecuted minorities that were fleeing the conflict from ISIS. One of the great challenges that we had was enough, interestingly—and you touched on it—Kurdish Kurmanji speakers in Australia. I think we had three at the time. It was a real issue for us to make sure that the Yazidis community were able to have people accredited in Australia to speak the language. I don't think that's necessarily a failing on any part of government or the community. It's more just the speed at which we tried to bring 12,000 people to this country to make them safe and settle them quickly.

One of the things that I'm really proud of—and with the support and leadership of the New South Wales Government—has been our scholarship program. Our scholarship program started in 2019 and one of the focused languages was Kurdish Kurmanji. I'm really pleased to advise that, as of this year—we started that scholarship program with about 150 places a year. As at this year it's now up to 450 places a year with some additional investment from the New South Wales Government. They are exactly the sorts of programs that we need and that you're referring to to make sure that we have enough accredited translators and interpreters in those new and emerging languages. I'm not naive enough to think 450 places in one program is going to solve the problem. It's not. The other intricacy about your question is interpreting and translating is a profession. They should certainly not be providing Arabic interpreters for those that are speaking Kurdish Kurmanji. I'm happy to investigate the specifics of that case. If that's a part of government or whether that's an NGO or others, I'm happy to work with those relevant people in that space to make sure of the cultural appropriation.

But, with respect to the township of Wagga Wagga and so forth, one of the key initiatives of the scholarship program is to grow more interpreters in our regional areas. Armidale has been a focus for us for obvious reasons with the settlement of 500 Yazidis up there—no different in Wagga. That's a part of why we pushed for the Albury-Riverina area to be a part of the GROW pilot to make sure that all of the associated infrastructure, language, schools, nuanced health care, counselling support that you touched on before—again, off the back of some of the crises in the Ukraine and Afghanistan, we've taken learnings from that Syrian-Iraqi conflict and we've applied our learnings to make sure that people such as STARTTS have torture- and trauma-informed support in language for the people of Afghanistan and the Ukraine, taking those learnings out of the Syrian-Iraqi example. So it's certainly front of mind.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Do you accept that the Yazidi community in Wagga Wagga has actually been there for five years now? It's not like it's this year's problem or last year's issue; they've been settled for five years. These are issues that are happening today and similar issues are also happening within the school community. The real concern there is: Is this a proper priority for you? Because what we understand is happening is that we are compounding some problems through, perhaps at the moment, evidence of a failing settlement of a very traumatised community that is looking very hard for healing and settlement.

Mr MARK COURE: Look, this year's budget was very important for Multicultural NSW. It was a record \$28 million in the New South Wales budget over the next two years to support multicultural communities across the State. A major component of this—there's \$16 million, which will go towards supporting things like the whole-of-government language services. But a component of this was expanding an interpreter scholarship program to support the multilingual people to become qualified and practising translators.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Minister, are you telling me that the five-year settled community can get some guarantee this is going to get resolved?

Mr MARK COURE: That is something that we are working towards, yes.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: Minister, recently three people were appointed to the Multicultural NSW Advisory Board. Nick Kaldas has been appointed as the new chair. I congratulate you on his appointment. He's a former police officer and a real gentleman. I take this opportunity to also wish Dr Harry Harinath, the outgoing chair, well for his service to Multicultural NSW. Minister, out of curiosity, can you outline what the process involves in appointing a person on the board? How is it conducted?

Mr MARK COURE: You're absolutely right. Multicultural NSW Advisory Board includes the Chief Executive Officer of Multicultural NSW and 15 part-time members. Again, you are right: From 1 July the board is chaired by former New South Wales deputy police commissioner Nick Kaldas. Appointments are made based on diverse qualifications, experience, backgrounds that represent the diverse and changing needs of New South Wales. A bit of background, Mr Moselmane—members are appointed for terms of up to three years by the Governor of New South Wales. Members may serve no more than three terms—for example, Dr Harry Harinath—to ensure the board reflects the current needs of New South Wales. I also put on record my appreciation and thanks to Dr Harry Harinath, who for not just over 10 years as a board member and chair but over many generations, for the work that he has done in multicultural communities right across New South Wales.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: Two of those three people appointed as a result of the process you just indicated were Sam Elmir and Ms Sally Betts. Can you give us a brief run-down on Sam Elmir's objective merits for receiving this appointment?

Mr MARK COURE: Again, both Mr Elmir and Ms Betts were appointed by the previous Minister, both of which have local government experience. Mr Elmir has a small business background and he's active in the Arabic communities. Ms Betts, again, has local government experience and has small business background as well.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: When did you first meet Sam Elmir?

Mr MARK COURE: I would've met him 20 years ago.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: So you know Sam Elmir very well?

Mr MARK COURE: I do.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: So you do? So you're a real friend of Sam Elmir?

Mr MARK COURE: I'm friends with everyone.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: But in this instance, it's specifically about Sam Elmir. Are you a friend of Sam Elmir?

Mr MARK COURE: I'm a friend of Sam Elmir. I know Sam Elmir.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: Is Sam Elmir a Liberal Party councillor on Georges River Council?

Mr MARK COURE: I believe so.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: You believe so, or you know so?

Mr MARK COURE: I know so.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: You know so? That's better. Have you ever attended a Liberal Party branch meeting with Sam Elmir?

Mr MARK COURE: Branch meetings, conference meetings—

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: Liberal Party branch meetings?

Mr MARK COURE: I have, yes.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: Has Sam Elmir ever sat on the Liberal Party State Electorate Conference for your seat of Oatley?

Mr MARK COURE: Not that I'm aware of.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: It's your own seat.

Mr MARK COURE: His branch is in the Kogarah seat, not the Oatley seat.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: You're telling us that he has not sat at the electorate conference of the seat of Oatley?

Mr MARK COURE: That's correct. That's what I'm aware of, yes.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: Right. Has Sam Elmir ever campaigned to get you elected to Parliament?

Mr MARK COURE: Sam Elmir?

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: Yes. Sam Elmir.

Mr MARK COURE: He might have been on a polling booth, or he might have done pre-poll. He might have.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: You have known him for 20 years, Minister. I'm sure you would know whether he might have, or he has, or he hasn't.

Mr MARK COURE: I can look into it for you.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: Look into what, Minister? Did he—

Mr MARK COURE: To answer your question.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: The question is has Sam Elmir ever campaigned to get you elected to Parliament? Has he ever helped you during your campaign to get elected for the seat of Oatley?

Mr MARK COURE: He might have, so the answer is yes. I don't recall him ever being a booth captain or on pre-poll.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: I did not ask about that. I was just asking about whether he has ever campaigned to get you elected to Parliament.

Mr MARK COURE: I'll take it on notice, if that's okay.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: Minister, as a friend of yours for the last 20 years—I know my friends would jump in helping me get elected. I'm sure—

Mr MARK COURE: I also have friends that wouldn't.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: That wouldn't? Is he one of those?

Mr MARK COURE: If I can take that on notice?

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: Is he one of those who would have supported your election to Parliament?

Mr MARK COURE: Yes, possibly. Yes.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: Thank you. Have you ever campaigned to help Sam Elmir get elected to council?

Mr MARK COURE: I have.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: Has Sam Elmir ever been a member of the NSW Liberal Party State Executive?

Mr MARK COURE: He is.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: Is he currently?

Mr MARK COURE: Yes, he is.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: You can see where my questions are going, Minister, in terms of the appointment of Sam Elmir—a Liberal Party operative, a councillor in the Liberal Party, a close friend, a confidant of yours, being chosen for the Multicultural NSW Advisory Board, and criticism when questions have been asked. Why is Multicultural NSW being stacked with Liberal Party members? What is your response to that, Minister?

Mr MARK COURE: My understanding is the appointment of Sam Elmir was appointed by the previous Minister.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: With no consultation with you, you are saying?

Mr MARK COURE: That's my advice. He was appointed on—I can double-check the date, but it was certainly December of last year. I was appointed as Minister at the tail end of last year.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: There was no consultation with you, when he was appointed to the board, that he would be appointed to the advisory board?

Mr MARK COURE: My advice was the appointments were done prior to me being appointed as Minister.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: So there was no consultation with you, prior to you being Minister?

Mr MARK COURE: He was already on the board, I believe.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: Yes. But was there any consultation with you? Did you nominate him to be—

Mr MARK COURE: No.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: You didn't?

Mr MARK COURE: No.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: How was his nomination conducted? Who nominated him?

Mr MARK COURE: That was before my time, so I might want to take that on notice, unless the agency head, Mr La Posta, would want to add to that.

JOSEPH LA POSTA: Good morning. There was a process that was run. We went out with open expressions of interest. Off the top of my head, I can't remember if it was this round or the previous round—I'm happy to take the specifics on notice. But there was either 154 applications/expressions of interest or, I think, in this round, there was about 70 to 80 expressions of interest. We ran through a process with those candidates in terms of the different credentials that we were looking for. I now know those things that you are talking about but, at the time, when I was looking at the potential candidates and my CFO was running through the list, I didn't know any of those things that you alluded to now. We just stacked up each of the candidates.

We went through a merit-based selection process based off a matrix. It was determined that there were six people who were short-listed for interview—six, maybe eight. I think it was six, and I'm happy to provide the specifics on notice. We then went through a process in terms of that short-listing process, ranking them with a series of questions, and a recommendation went up to the Minister. The Minister then progressed that recommendation, made the final determination, took it to Cabinet and the Governor signed it off. In fairness to Minister Coure, I think it was the first document that the Minister signed. He had no ministerial stewardship over it, because it's an ExCo appointment made by the Governor.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: So Minister Coure actually signed the appointment?

JOSEPH LA POSTA: But the decision had already been made by Cabinet and the Governor.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: Yes, but the Minister was aware of what he was signing to?

JOSEPH LA POSTA: I can't speak to that.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: You just said so.

Mr MARK COURE: It was an ExCo decision, already, I understand, made by the previous Minister a few weeks earlier. But in terms of—sorry, what's the gist of your question?

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: You could have questioned the fact that he is a friend of yours—the fact he was a 20-year friend of yours, a member of the Liberal Party. A potential question mark could have been raised by the public that you were appointing a Liberal Party operative on the Multicultural NSW board.

Mr MARK COURE: Many of these appointments are sort of arm's length of the Minister. My agency ensures, as Mr La Posta has already said, that all applicants for vacancies on the advisory board are appropriately vetted. This includes providing proof of qualifications, referees who can be contacted about the work history, before anyone is appointed. My agency conducts all necessary probity checks.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: Mr La Posta, you mentioned that there was a number of applicants and there was a short list. Can we get a copy of that short list, or the applicants, so that we can have a look at the other applicants that were put forward?

JOSEPH LA POSTA: I have no reason to withhold that information from you, Mr Moselmane, unless there is something that legally precludes me. Unless there's something in terms of confidentiality that I can't, happy to share that.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: I understand that. If there's confidentiality, I understand that.

JOSEPH LA POSTA: I take it on notice.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: Thank you so much. Minister, you just signed off on Sam Elmir's appointment?

Mr MARK COURE: Can I take that on notice? I understand it was appointed by the previous Minister, approved through ExCo already. But I will provide a response, if I can, at a later date. I'll take that on notice.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: All right. Given that your CEO indicated that you have signed it, we'll wait and see what your response—

JOSEPH LA POSTA: Mr Moselmane, the appointment was made by Cabinet and then confirmed by the Governor, so it's not—

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: But the Minister signed off on it?

JOSEPH LA POSTA: He issued the letter to the successful candidate that the decision was made about. It would be unfair to say that the Minister made the determination. He didn't. It was the determination of the previous Minister, in consultation with the Cabinet, and then ultimately signed by the Governor.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: In all these questions, I'm not questioning the integrity of Sam Elmir. He's a credible person and one with credentials. I'm asking about the process, and the look that members of the Multicultural NSW—there's two positions on the board and suddenly those two positions are Liberal Party operatives. If there were another two positions coming up, another two Liberal Party members being put on the board, it becomes a branch of the Liberal Party. And you can see some of the criticism that would be developing as a result of what has happened. With regards to Sally Betts—can you give us a brief run-down on Sally Betts, for example? What are the objective merits of her receiving this appointment?

Mr MARK COURE: Ms Betts is active in her community, very active in local government and has been for many generations—previous small business background. I come back to my previous response, Mr Moselmane. Appointments are all made based on diverse qualifications, experience and backgrounds that represent the diverse and changing needs of New South Wales.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: Was Sally Betts in the same process, Mr La Posta?

JOSEPH LA POSTA: Mr Moselmane, Sally Betts was—

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: Out of the six short-listed, two members of the Liberal Party who are on the State Executive were selected to be appointed on Multicultural NSW. Doesn't that look a bit questionable to you, Minister?

Mr MARK COURE: The matter occurred before my time as Minister, as you know. Again, the appointments are merit based, based on diverse qualifications, experience and backgrounds that represent the diverse and changing needs of New South Wales.

JOSEPH LA POSTA: Mr Moselmane, I'll put it from my perspective. The political conversation is well outside of my remit. From my perspective, Sally Betts is a former mayor of a very multicultural council and is still very active on that council. She had a strong and supportive reference from the Jewish Board of Deputies, and she had a number of other references which spoke very highly of that individual. In terms of State Executives and these things, I honestly have no idea because I've got bigger things to worry about in terms of social cohesion and community relations.

In terms of the way that Sally performed during that interview process, she was excellent, she was incredibly well prepared, and I was comfortable putting that recommendation to the Minister as suitable, as I was for Ramneek Singh—who is also on the board, from the Young Sikh Professionals Network—and as I was for Sam Elmir, who also came as an experienced local councillor who had a strong connection to his community,

answered the questions well and came with high regard from both the Lebanese Muslim Association and the Maronite community. That's what I cared about. That was the suitability assessment I ran.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: As I indicated, and I reiterate my comment, these questions are not about their credibility or their credentials. I take what you say that they are highly respected individuals, but it's the process that I'm asking about. In those two appointments, 125—I think you indicated—had nominated or applied and six were short-listed. Two were appointed, and they just happen to be two members of the Liberal Party and the State Executive. Doesn't it look dodgy to you, Minister?

Mr MARK COURE: Can I just back up a little bit? Firstly, the assessment process undertaken by Multicultural NSW started months earlier. Of course, in August 2021 two board members left after nine years of sterling service to the community on that board. Another vacancy occurred a few months earlier—I think it was in February of last year. The process in which the two or three vacancies occurred and were filled was before I was Minister for Multiculturalism.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: Did you sign off on the second appointment, of Sally Betts, as well?

Mr MARK COURE: I believe it went through ExCo, before my time. I think the appointment was made—

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: The process was before your time, but did you sign off, as you did for Sam Elmir, on the final appointment of Sally Betts?

Mr MARK COURE: If I can take that on notice and report back, if that's okay.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: When was this appointment? In June? When were the appointments, Mr La Posta?

JOSEPH LA POSTA: I think the Minister said he's taking it on notice.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: No, I'm asking again. I'm asking you now, Mr La Posta. When were the appointments made? Was it in June, July or August?

Mr MARK COURE: The term of his appointment?

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: The official announcement for the appointment of—

Mr MARK COURE: I made the official announcement.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: So it wouldn't be too hard to remember, Minister, if you signed off on it three months ago.

Mr MARK COURE: It wasn't three months ago, but I'll take that on notice, if I can, in terms of the process in which these appointments were made. I will just say this, and I want to finish off on this remark, if I can. An advertising campaign seeking expressions of interest to recruit a new member is in accordance with the Public Service Commissioner's appointment standards for boards and committees in the New South Wales public sector, and that went out. At the end of the day, these advisory board positions and the process in which these were filled was started before my time.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: Minister, you can see that when people in the multicultural community are looking at the board, they would expect diversity on the board. Any opportunity could have been given, for example, to members of the Australian Pakistani community. There has never been a member of the Pakistani community on the board—maybe in the 1980s or 1990s. There has never been a member of the Australian Bangladeshi community on the board. There has never been a member of the Nepalese community on the board, or the Iraqis, the Assyrians or the Syrians. There are many other multicultural communities that would have fit well and served the community well had they been given the opportunity to be on the board. Why did the Ministry or the department not look at other communities and have those communities included on the board rather than two Liberal Party members?

Mr MARK COURE: At the end of the day, as we all know, this is an independent process, arm's length of my office and as Minister.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: Who conducts the independent process?

Mr MARK COURE: Multicultural NSW CEO, Joseph La Posta, might want to add to that response.

JOSEPH LA POSTA: I don't know about the State Executive, nor do I care. What I care about is the public perception, which is what you're touching on. I also take feedback that you give us in budget estimates

really seriously. A couple of years ago, you challenged me to have more Arabic speakers on the board. I went and I got Nick Kaldas and Sam Elmir. Sam Elmir came through this process, who also speaks Arabic and comes highly regarded. Nothing would make me more happy than to have the 307 different ancestries that this great State represents on our board. It is not just about them representing the Pakistani community on the board; it's about representing all communities on the board. When advisory board members come on the board, it's actually less about the Latin American community that they may come from and more how they service the wider community that's there. With respect to those things, we are trying to do more and more around the Yazidi community, as Ms Higginson said before, and the Afghan community to encourage more of our new and emerging communities, so that they have a voice and that the current themes and challenges they face are represented on the board.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: How are you encouraging them to nominate to the board? When nominations open, do you actually communicate with the multicultural communities and tell the Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, and the Nepalese, "Look, there's a vacancy now. Please nominate"? Do you do that?

JOSEPH LA POSTA: Yes, I do.

Mr MARK COURE: Can I also add to that response? I do too. In the many community events that I attend—not just those communities, but many others. Any time there is a vacancy, and there was one recently that has gone out for advertisement, I have always gone out to the communities and I encourage them. We want a Multicultural NSW advisory board that reflects our State. We are a great example of multiculturalism—a State that has over 300 different ancestries and speaking over 200 different languages. We have people from all over the globe, from each corner of the globe. I, along with Mr La Posta, want an advisory board that reflects just that.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: Minister, you indicated that it's an independent process. Can you describe to me how that independent process is? Who conducts it? Who is involved in this process?

Mr MARK COURE: That is an operational matter. The head of my agency would like to answer that.

JOSEPH LA POSTA: We go out with an expression-of-interest process. Based off the expression-of-interest process, we determine suitability for those who should be interviewed. We can't, obviously, interview everyone. We have a short-list, and I think in this instance—

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: Who is "we"? Is it you and—

JOSEPH LA POSTA: MNSW.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: Is it just you, as the CEO?

JOSEPH LA POSTA: Up until this point, it's not even me. It's my team, which is led by our people in the corporate division.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: Yes, they put out the request.

JOSEPH LA POSTA: They manage all of that. Then they come in with the list of—I think, in this instance, it was about 70 or 75 in this round. I think the previous round, where we went out with three, was 154. They come in and they say, "Here's potentially the top 20 people. What do we think?" And we look to get a blend of different backgrounds, locations, ethnicities, religions and languages into that mix. Then we fine-tune it down to about six. The ultimate decision, though, is made by the Minister—not this Minister, because it was before his time, but by the previous Minister. Then that recommendation goes up to Cabinet.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: So that independent process is conducted by you and your staff?

JOSEPH LA POSTA: Up until the point of the appointment. The CEO does not make the appointment of the advisory board members. We make a recommendation to the Minister.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: Who makes the recommendation? You?

JOSEPH LA POSTA: I make a suitability recommendation, in this instance, to the Minister, and the Minister makes the determination around who they want to put forward to Cabinet.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: Anybody else apart from you and your department? Are there any others? Is there an agency involved that assists with the suitability and the assessment?

JOSEPH LA POSTA: Mr Moselmane, the scarce resources that this agency gets goes into running this agency as tightly and as efficiently as it can.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: I'm trying to understand, is it just you—

JOSEPH LA POSTA: I'm not bringing in an external agency to run a process that I can do in-house and save money and put that money into community grants.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: Minister, in January this year, Yoni Bashan of *The Australian* newspaper reported that you had ordered a review of the Ministerial Advisory Council on Ageing because you had concerns about the number of political Liberal Party appointments made shortly before you became the Minister. One of the appointees mentioned in the article was, in fact, Sally Betts. A senior Government official familiar with the discussions said you were, and I quote, "livid" and that you viewed Liberal Party appointees as a problem that you were trying to fix. Have you fixed that problem, Minister?

Mr MARK COURE: The MACA has—that's the Ministerial Advisory Council on Ageing. The MACA provides advice on matters that affect the needs and interests of wellbeing of seniors in New South Wales. It's chaired—selected by their knowledge and expertise and of course currently chaired by Kathryn Greiner, AO. I have provided MACA with a working plan of members in terms of members to engage directly with networks and provide feedback. In regards to the recruitment of members to MACA, it's undertaken according to Public Service Commission guidelines, and again these appointments happened prior to my time in the portfolio.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: But were you angry about the fact that Ms Sally Betts, for example, was appointed onto the council?

Mr MARK COURE: Can I just say that in any case I'm advised that all appointments to the advisory council were made on merit, with each appointee chosen for their strong diverse backgrounds in ageing and seniors.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: I accept that, but were you upset about the process?

Mr MARK COURE: Ms Sally Betts—did you mention Ms Sally Betts?

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: Yes.

Mr MARK COURE: Ms Sally Betts brings experience. They all bring experience and skills relevant to the Ministerial Advisory Council on Ageing.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: So you're happy to have Ms Sally Betts continue on the Ministerial Advisory Council on Ageing as well as the Multicultural NSW Advisory Board.

Mr MARK COURE: The article is in fact incorrect concerning a review. However, I personally looked over the qualifications of all MACA members when I became Minister to understand the make-up and experience of MACA.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: And so you're happy with Sally Betts being on that board and also on your board.

Mr MARK COURE: I'm happy with every single member of that board. MACA is a vital resource to me as Minister for Seniors and the whole of New South Wales Government, providing advice on a wide range of issues affecting the needs, interests and wellbeing for older people in New South Wales.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: Minister, can't you see that on various boards, Liberal Party members are being stacked on those boards? Doesn't it appear like it's jobs for mates?

Mr MARK COURE: It doesn't appear like that at all. As I said before, I personally looked over the qualifications of all MACA members when I became Minister for Seniors to understand the make-up and experience of MACA. MACA meets regularly, and I attend every one of those meetings. Every one of those board appointees were appointed to provide a vital resource to me as Minister for Seniors, and they're doing just that. In fact, the MACA board historically has met four or five times throughout the year. I think they're meeting an additional time this year. We're also taking it out to the regions as well. Recently we were in Port Macquarie. Hopefully later in this year we'll be either in Wollongong or the Central Coast. But they provide a very vital resource for me as Minister for Seniors and the whole of New South Wales Government, providing advice on a wide range of issues affecting the needs, the interests and wellbeing of older people in New South Wales and the impact of the ageing population.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: Minister, just before I hand over to my colleague, you indicated that the Yoni Bashan story in *The Australian* newspaper was incorrect. What aspect of it was incorrect so I just understand?

Mr MARK COURE: I didn't order a review.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: You didn't order a review?

Mr MARK COURE: No.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Minister, in light of the answer you gave in the final part of my questioning earlier with respect to you not having spoken to the Treasurer, the Hon. Matt Kean, in regards to this grave financial difficulty that we discussed with our questions, do you undertake or would you be prepared to undertake after this hearing today to convene a meeting with yourself, the Treasurer and the commissioner to specifically discuss and resolve the financial challenges and problems associated with the commission?

Mr MARK COURE: In regards to your answer, as I mentioned before, discussions are already taking place with the head of Communities and Justice and of course Minister Natasha Maclaren-Jones in regards to the funding of this moving forward. I've personally—

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: I asked you a question in regards to: Would you be prepared—you, as the Minister responsible for seniors. Knowing full well of the problem, being fully appraised of the problem before today and me providing some extra highlighting of the issue, would you be prepared to meet with the Treasurer and the commissioner and of course the secretary to discuss and resolve this most significant problem with respect to this most important agency after this hearing?

Mr MARK COURE: I will do everything I can to raise these issues directly with the Treasurer.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: So the answer is "no".

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Minister, and perhaps Mr La Posta, if I could just go back for a second to the Yazidi community. If there was a proposal put to you about an appropriate parcel of Crown land in that Wagga area community for the purpose of developing a sort of place of cultural worship and gardening, is that something that you would be willing to look at and work towards?

Mr MARK COURE: Certainly would.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Terrific, thank you. It's just something quite specific that community members have reached out, and it just seems like such an incredibly wonderful idea and project and something that perhaps I can make an approach to you.

Mr MARK COURE: We can certainly work together on this project. I'll have Mr La Posta add to my response in a second, but I've met that community down there. I've met the Yazidi community in Armidale as well—a fairly new established community up there. They're doing a wonderful job in Armidale, as is the case down south as well. I will certainly work with you and take that offline and see what we can do to help.

JOSEPH LA POSTA: Ms Higginson, I don't know if this is inadvertent or quite targeted but it's one of the things that I'm most passionate about—those places where different communities can congregate and come together. There's an example in Wagga at the moment just outside of town of a community garden where you have members of the Yazidi community, the Burma community, Afghan community, lots of our new and emerging communities all coming together and growing their respective plants and fruits and then sharing them across. Nothing would make me more happier than to collaborate on a project like that.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Wonderful, thank you. Just going back to translations—language in particular. What is the current time frame between Government announcements being made and then translations being made available to culturally and linguistically diverse communities?

Mr MARK COURE: Ms Higginson, that's an operational matter so I might turn to Joseph La Posta on that.

JOSEPH LA POSTA: We got lots of feedback during the pandemic that it was not going as quickly as it could and it should, and we did two things. The first thing was we brought in SBS to help us with the live interpreting of the daily 11.00 a.m. press conferences, and unsurprising to me and probably a number of members that come from non-English speaking backgrounds or speak languages other than English at home, it took off and so it was wonderful to see those SBS 11.00 a.m. Premier Berejiklian, Kerry Chant press conferences live streamed in 10 different languages. They averaged 35,000 per day; they reached over two million people. We took that learning to Minister Coure who, through the last budget process really pleasingly with Premiers and ERC and others, advocated for us to be able to do same-day translation services, and so now in our top 10 languages we have the capability.

It's also a great employment opportunity. Mr Moselmane and others have asked me previously about providing more work for our interpreters and translators, for us to explore ways to bring some of our casual interpreters in-house as part-time staff to come in and work for a period of time each and every day to make sure that any of the key government messaging or announcements—if there's funding coming out for emergency pandemics or floods or any of these sorts of initiatives, that we can then translate that on the same day and then

distribute that to communities. We can't do that in all languages yet. But with our new and emerging languages or if there were key communities that were smaller communities but pockets we knew we needed to engage, we can normally do it within, at most, 24 hours.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Minister, are you satisfied with the accuracy of how we're doing that and the checks that we are getting—you know, the accuracy and the cultural appropriateness of the service?

Mr MARK COURE: It's a really good question. I want to say thank you to the agency. They have done an amazing job in getting that information out to the community, particularly over the last two years with COVID-19. It's been a collaboration between Multicultural NSW, Department of Customer Service and, of course, NSW Health, their media unit or multicultural media unit as well, ensuring the NSW Government's campaign rollout to diverse audiences and communities; engaging with multicultural media—as Mr La Posta just mentioned, SBS; and I acknowledge my mother-in-law, who is of Lebanese background, thought the SBS service was outstanding—including print, radio and digital. We have seen a translation of over 3,900 resources covering public health information in more than 60 different languages since the start of the pandemic.

During the height of the pandemic, as Mr La Posta has just mentioned, we worked with SBS to translate the live daily press conferences during the height of the Delta outbreak. Arabic was the first and, I think, Vietnamese was one of the first as well. They were the first to translate when it started as a pilot program. This was the first of its kind in Australia and such a vital service for those communities—a bit of a plug for my mother-in-law, again, who tuned into SBS. The community was terrific. We saw two million views across the 10 languages. Mr La Posta mentioned some of those: Arabic, Bangla, Cantonese, Greek, just to name a few. As an agency, they are regularly collaborating with NSW Health to conduct regular press conferences with multicultural media, which has been vital in getting out those messages as quickly as possible. I'm holding them on a regular basis. We're also holding face-to-face, larger community forums as well. The most recent one was in Blacktown, I think a week ago or two weeks ago. And we have backed this service with additional money in the budget, as I've mentioned previously.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: If the perception or the experience is the messaging is not appropriate, is there a system for checking and improvement? Is that built in?

Mr MARK COURE: It's an operational matter, so I might just throw that to Mr La Posta, if you don't mind.

JOSEPH LA POSTA: There are two challenges we have in this space and, again, your question is spot on. Am I confident in the accuracy? Absolutely, because no-one would have been castigated more than me if we put up incorrectly translated material during the pandemic. The cultural appropriation piece is really tricky. Our qualified interpreters and translators are there to strictly interpret the terminology from one language to another. The Commonwealth Government came out with a campaign during the pandemic called the Arm Up campaign, which was, I guess, to some English-speaking communities about vaccination. It was completely missed by our Arabic-speaking community—when we directly translated the "Arm Up" campaign, it said "to gather arms". That's the last thing we want people doing in the middle of a pandemic.

So the cultural appropriation piece is a challenge for me because often all of us use slogans or colloquial language to describe something to try and endear ourselves to the audience we're trying to engage or potentially influence behavioural change with. That is very, very difficult for interpreters and translators to then try and manage. I'm really confident in the accuracy. The process around the colloquialisation and the education piece that I have across government with colleagues around the importance of simple, clear language that can then be easier to be translated in interpreting is an ongoing responsibility.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: What about the converse? Are you, Minister, satisfied that at the moment if culturally and linguistically diverse people are trying to contact the Government for any assistance, service, et cetera that's out there, they are able to do that? And what degree of confidence do you have that we're doing this well?

Mr MARK COURE: In regards to your question, language services play such a vital part in the Government's initiatives, policies and so forth, particularly obviously during COVID-19. It's a key function of Multicultural NSW to provide those interpreting and translation services in many languages—I think it's over 100 languages—to New South Wales Government departments, non-government agencies and, of course, the public. Multicultural NSW, they deliver onsite, telephone and video interpreting, translating a broad range of material including, of course, about COVID-19. I'm advised it's 110 languages. At the end of the day, in the recent State budget we saw an increase of over \$28 million, with a large component of this to increase that component of interpretation and language services. We want to make sure that of that \$28 million, \$16 million will go towards supporting the whole-of-government language service.

That's the boosting of translations of essential service messages from governments, in turn increasing job opportunities for professional translators and expanding the interpreter scholarship program that Mr La Posta and I had mentioned earlier, to really support the multilingual people to become qualified practising translators. I will get to an example in a sec. And creating a school-based language service career strategy as well, which is vital, I think, in developing and providing job pathways for young people taking a language to the HSC and beyond, for language learners with a focus on migrant students. The example I just wanted to give for the benefit of this Committee was my wife is a teacher who teaches English, head of her department at a local Catholic school in the shire, that is qualified—my point is, qualified—to teach Japanese and hasn't for a while.

This is the broader issue that I raised in an op ed piece earlier in the year and that is, of course, we want to encourage people to take up a second language or even a third language. My grandmother knew five or six—born in Egypt and knew five or six different languages. We want to encourage people to not just learn a second language but even a third language, because we live in a global city. We want to encourage people to take up interpreting to, obviously, make it easier for their communities. This is a broader issue. We're assisting with additional funding, \$16 million, that will go towards that whole-of-government language service, as I talked about before.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Thank you.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Thank you. Through you, Chair. Minister, the following question is meant to be a straightforward one and not a "gotcha" question. You probably smile at that, but I mean this genuinely. It's on the issue of the categories of elder abuse. I have to say, I was rather surprised to find out that you had not been briefed on what's the most significant report ever done in the history of Australia into elder abuse in this country, with some particular reflections on New South Wales. With respect to the categories of elder abuse, do you know what the six categories that are now used to define elder abuse are?

Mr MARK COURE: If it's okay with you, I might ask—

MELINDA NORTON: Apologies, I'll need to hear that question again.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Certainly. In regards to the matter of elder abuse, what are, if you're able to answer—and if not, take it on notice—the six categories that are used now to, in fact, consider the types of elder abuse? What are the six categories we use in Australia?

MELINDA NORTON: I'd need to take that on notice, but would make the observation that the department's been—is currently involved with the national plan around elder abuse and we, together with other parts of the New South Wales Government, report on that in terms of the responsibilities we have. But the Ageing and Disability Commission is the primary area that works in the area of elder abuse.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Can you name one category of elder abuse?

MELINDA NORTON: Financial abuse.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Any others you would like to nominate?

MELINDA NORTON: There is a range of types of abuse, both in the disability and aged care areas.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: No, I'm talking about elder abuse.

MELINDA NORTON: I'm not in an operational role.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Right. You're not in an operational role, but you would have thought that a reasonable person would conclude you ought to know what the categories of elder abuse are, given the senior position you hold?

MELINDA NORTON: I absolutely understand what elder abuse is, and we work closely with the Ageing and Disability Commissioner to support his work and the work of other Government agencies in New South Wales to both respond to the recommendations from the committee that you chaired but also the national plan.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: I'll move on from this now, but I just want to make this point to emphasise this: The report that was released last year, which nobody has thought important enough to brief the Minister for Seniors on, identified that one in six older Australians—that's around 15 per cent—reported experiencing elder abuse in the 12-month period that was surveyed between February and May 2020. There were 7,000 people surveyed all up, and approximately a third of those came from New South Wales. What I'm emphasising is that the issue of elder abuse has not only got red flags up everywhere; it's got sirens going off. It's got flashing lights, and I could go on and on. I just find it extraordinary that there seems to be a poverty of knowledge in front of us.

MICHAEL TIDBALL: Mr Donnelly, if I may assist the Committee, I am recently appointed. I, at the time of that report being released, was chief executive of the Law Council of Australia, and I know that similar piece of the report well. I have been very closely working with the Law Council, and in a previous role with the Law Society, in seeking to develop legal definitions of elder abuse. I acknowledge that this is, due to demographic changes as well as growing awareness, a massive challenge for the community. What I will do is take it on notice. I would be reluctant in my evidence to the Committee today to say that the department has done no work with that report, because I do not know. I acknowledge that it was a very significant piece of work. I acknowledge that it did make reflections on a number of jurisdictions, including New South Wales, but I'll confirm to the Committee whether the department has done any work in relation to it.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Thank you, sir. I move on to the issue around recommendation 10, which goes back to the 2016 inquiry that's been mentioned already. I move from the 2016 inquiry report that was tabled in June 2016 to the document titled *NSW Elder Abuse Inquiry Final Report June 2020*, a document that's now a couple of years old or so. I don't expect you to have that report in front of you; I'm not suggesting that. But that report goes through each of the recommendations that were put forward by the committee. Page 27 deals with No. 10, which provides:

That the NSW Police Force establish a Vulnerable Community Support Officer in each Regional Command in New South Wales, with the position entailing training and support to front line officers, police response, liaison with local service providers and other government agencies, community education, awareness and engagement.

At the time of this report, in June 2020, it indicates a pilot of six aged crime prevention officers [ACPOs] commenced in July 2019. We move forward now to a bit later, in 2019, when there is an announcement by the Government, held with appropriate publicity and fanfare. This is an important initiative, and I accept that governments are entitled to take advantage of the media and put things out there so people understand what's being done. I think that's relevant sometimes. The Government announced that 56 of those individuals would be appointed.

As you know full well, Minister, there are six NSW Police Force regions in New South Wales. The six regions are divided into police area commands in the metropolitan area and police districts in rural and regional New South Wales. Each region has seven to 12 police area commands or police districts, and there are 432 police stations in this State. Minister, can you provide the Committee with an update of how many aged crime prevention officers have been appointed as of today's date?

Mr MARK COURE: Yes, I can. Thank you for the question. To date 12 ACPOs have been allocated in the following New South Wales area commands—and I'll get to those commands in a sec. But the Minister for Police is the Minister primarily responsible for this issue, and he has responsibility for the delivery of the rollout of these officers. But as I mentioned before, to date there are 12 ACPOs that have been located at New South Wales police area commands across New South Wales. Further questions regarding the rollout should be directed to the Minister for Police. But I have—and no doubt this will be your supplementary question, Mr Donnelly—made representations and personally met with the Deputy Premier to raise with him the importance of having aged crime prevention officers in New South Wales. I will continue to do what I can to increase the number of ACPOs.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Would it be disrespectful for me to put to you, Minister, that whatever you have done thus far in your role as a senior Minister in regard to the appointment of additional aged crime prevention officers has come to naught?

Mr MARK COURE: I have spoken to directly to the Deputy Premier, and Minister for Police. I understand we've also written to the police commissioner on this issue as well. I have made strong representations on the importance of having aged crime prevention officers in New South Wales. I'll continue to do what I can to increase the number of ACPOs as Minister for Seniors.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Minister, the Government made an announcement in 2019 following the detailed evidence from a New South Wales inquiry. I'm not talking about the larger one; I'm talking about the specific inquiry in New South Wales. You can go through the report and read the chapters, the sections and all the evidence that led to recommendation 10. Off the back of that, very specifically, the Government consciously and deliberately made the decision to announce that it would appoint 56 of those individuals across the State to address what, through evidence, were heinous—I use the word deliberately—examples of elder abuse right across the State, from the Tweed to the Murray, out to Broken Hill and everywhere in between. How can the people of this State accept the response that you provided, which is that you'll continue to talk and advocate to resolve this matter?

Mr MARK COURE: Mr Donnelly, I believe that it is important for all New South Wales police officers—not just ACPOs, for example—to have the ability to manage issues relating to older people and elder abuse. This is an issue that, as you rightly said, we announced. It's an issue I have taken up with the Deputy

Premier, and Minister for Police—with him personally—and the importance of having aged crime prevention officers in New South Wales, and I'll do everything I can to ensure that these are rolled out as quickly as possible.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: May I ask when you last took it up with those individuals, to the best of your recollection?

Mr MARK COURE: The last time I took it up?

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Yes, to the best of your recollection.

Mr MARK COURE: It would have been a month or two ago.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: You would be aware, Minister, because you were here at the budget estimates in March, that Ms Smyth is not present with us today but was there at the time giving evidence.

The CHAIR: We're at 11 o'clock.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: I will put a full stop at that point and return later.

The CHAIR: We'll now break for 15 minutes and come back at quarter past 11.

(Short adjournment)

The CHAIR: We will resume the hearing. Opposition?

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Minister, I want to ask you about your travel to China. I'm just wanting to confirm how many times you've taken sponsored travel or hospitality in China?

Mr MARK COURE: I've travelled to China. Like all members of Parliament from all sides of politics, I've travelled from time to time to China. All my trips in my capacity as the member of the New South Wales Parliament have been disclosed. Five in total have been declared, one personal trip.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: You haven't taken any since the ones that you've declared?

Mr MARK COURE: That's correct.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Can I just confirm—there was some conjecture about this last year, which was that in other places you had said that you'd maybe gone "eight or nine times". When you say you've been to China "eight or nine times", is it in other capacities that you've travelled or is it that it's only five?

Mr MARK COURE: It's only five.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Can you just take me through who paid for those trips, please?

Mr MARK COURE: All my trips have been declared in my capacity as a member of Parliament through the appropriate channels.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: That's good. But I'm asking you if you could take me through that, please.

Mr MARK COURE: I don't have that information with me on hand.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Obviously you thought we might be asking questions about that. I'm surprised you don't have that. I'll just ask you this, and you can choose to answer. There was a trip in 2011, and I'm just trying to clarify what was paid for there. It states:

... inbound travel, accommodation and hospitality.

And:

The Chinese Peoples Institute for Foreign Affairs ...

Is that correct?

Mr MARK COURE: Again, that's what's been declared; that's correct.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: You've basically declared two trips: one, ACETCA, which was, I think, in 2015. Is that correct?

Mr MARK COURE: I don't have that information in front of me, but all of our trips have been declared.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Minister, that's fine. But I'm hoping that you're actually able to tell us. You're the Minister for Multiculturalism, and it's important that we understand these. You have been asked about some of these before, so I'm a little surprised that you don't have the information. What I'm trying to understand

is, particularly in two of these—one to ACETCA in 2015, which was to Fujian. You don't outline what contribution was made to your travel there. I'm wondering if you can expand on that, please?

Mr MARK COURE: Again, all my trips have been declared in my capacity as a member of Parliament, and those disclosures have been publicly available for many, many years.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: As I said, they're publicly available so that we can ask you about them, which is what I'm doing. If you're not wanting to answer, that's a problem. If you don't have it here, will you take on notice what other contributions to travel were in relation to the trip to Fujian in 2015?

Mr MARK COURE: I can take that on notice.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: This is a similar issue, where you went with Xinfeng Group, Fengnan district leaders and government leaders to—I can't read my own writing. I think it was in 2016. Can you provide information on what contribution to travel was made there?

Mr MARK COURE: As I said, all my trips have been declared for many, many years as a member of Parliament, and have been disclosed.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Yes. That's not what I'm asking you. I appreciate that. Exactly the point of declarations is to then actually be examined on those, and that's what I'm asking. If you don't have the details here today, are you able to take that on notice and provide information to the Committee in relation to those?

Mr MARK COURE: I can take that on notice.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: As I said, I'm seeking clarity on who paid for the trips and what other contributions were made in relation to that because it's not clear on two of those declarations. You'll take that on notice and provide that to the Committee?

Mr MARK COURE: Yes.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Will you also be able to provide information on who else went on those trips with you?

Mr MARK COURE: I can do my level best to ensure that every single person who has gone on those trips will be—I can take that on notice.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: What would be ideal is if you could actually provide the itineraries for those trips. Will you be willing to provide those to the Committee?

Mr MARK COURE: If they're available, yes.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: You think they might not be available?

Mr MARK COURE: They were many years ago, Ms Sharpe.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Yes, that's fine.

The Hon. PETER POULOS: Prior to becoming a Minister.

Mr MARK COURE: What's that?

The Hon. PETER POULOS: It's not even when you were Minister.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: How many times have you travelled with Con Hindi to China?

Mr MARK COURE: I understand I attended a trip to China and Con Hindi was present. But, again, all my trips in my capacity as a member of Parliament have been disclosed and declared.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: When was that?

Mr MARK COURE: I'll take that on notice.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Again, you can't tell us?

Mr MARK COURE: I'll take that on notice.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Are you able to confirm whether it was the 2015 or 2016 trip?

Mr MARK COURE: I'll take that on notice.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: So you don't know—just to confirm, was it in 2015 or 2016?

Mr MARK COURE: As I mentioned before in my previous answer, I'll take that on notice.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: When you came back from your trip in 2016, which was with the Xinfeng Group—they sponsored your trip—you declared them as the sponsor. Is that correct?

Mr MARK COURE: As I said, all my trips are declared, as a member of Parliament, and have been disclosed for many, many years.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Just to confirm that you are going to provide to the Committee what the extent of the sponsorship was—that is, was it travel, was it accommodation?

Mr MARK COURE: I'll take that on notice if that's all right.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Was Mr Hindi on that trip?

Mr MARK COURE: As I mentioned before in my previous answer, I'll take that question on notice—

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Is it that you're not sure or that you don't want to tell us?

Mr MARK COURE: —so that I can get you a correct answer.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Is it that you're not sure or you can't remember or you just don't want to tell us?

Mr MARK COURE: No, I will take it on notice and provide you with an answer.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: An answer? Are you committing to providing an answer that will detail the questions that I'm asking?

Mr MARK COURE: Yes, I will provide you with an answer to every single question.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Were you aware that Xinfeng was providing sponsorship to Con Hindi's travel to China as well?

Mr MARK COURE: I'm not aware of that, no.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Were you not aware at the time, or you weren't aware until I asked this question?

Mr MARK COURE: I'm not aware of what arrangements Mr Hindi has.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Did you assume that it would've been the same as your arrangement?

Mr MARK COURE: I'm not aware of any arrangement Mr Hindi had.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: How many meetings have you had with Yuqing Liu or Xinfeng employees?

Mr MARK COURE: I don't recall meeting those individuals but, again, I will take that on notice.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Can you tell us also if it was as an MP, or break it down as an MP or as a Minister?

Mr MARK COURE: I don't recall those names, but I will take it on notice.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: But you obviously met with Xinfeng employees, but you're just not sure which ones. Is that correct?

Mr MARK COURE: Again, I will take that on notice.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: You've declared a trip that was sponsored by this organisation.

Mr MARK COURE: I don't know these individuals you mentioned.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: No, but I'm not asking now about just the individuals; I'm asking about the company itself. Clearly you met with their employees.

Mr MARK COURE: Again, I will take that on notice.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: They sponsored your trip but you can't tell us whether they met with you or not—

Mr MARK COURE: You just mentioned—

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: —or whether you travelled with them?

Mr MARK COURE: Sorry, Ms Sharpe, you've just raised two individuals. Is that correct?

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: No, I raised one individual, which was Yuqing Liu, and then, more broadly, your trip, as I understand it, was taken with the Xinfeng Group in 2016. What does the Xinfeng Group do?

Mr MARK COURE: Again, I'll take that on notice.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: You don't know? They sponsored your travel, but you don't know?

Mr MARK COURE: I'm not familiar with that individual.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: No, it's not an individual. My understanding is it's the name of the organisation.

Mr MARK COURE: I'm not familiar with—obviously it was six years ago, so I will take that on notice.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: You'll let us know. Thank you. I find it a little bit unusual that an organisation that clearly contributed to your travel—you can't tell us anything about what they do. You're not going to tell us. You genuinely can't remember? Or are you just taking it on notice because you don't want to answer?

Mr MARK COURE: I will take it on notice and provide you with an answer.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Point of order: I haven't been in here for the rest of the morning, so I don't know if this has been raised before. Has it been made clear to the Minister that when he takes a question on notice, he can only do that if he is unable to answer the question without having information in front of him? You're not allowed to just take things on notice.

The CHAIR: I think he does know that. But he can also elect to take it on notice.

Mr MARK COURE: I don't have the information in front of me.

The Hon. PETER POULOS: Surely, these questions aren't remotely connected to his current role as Minister.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: They're absolutely connected to his role as current Minister. He's the Minister for Multiculturalism. The travel and work that he undertakes is important.

The Hon. PETER POULOS: Prior to his appointment.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Minister, have you ever made representations to an MP or Minister on behalf of Xinfeng?

Mr MARK COURE: Not that I'm aware of. No.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Can you take it on notice whether you have? Will you check?

Mr MARK COURE: I can check. Certainly can, yes.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: When I say "representations", I also mean to local councils or to a Federal government agency.

Mr MARK COURE: I can check. Yes.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Just to be clear, you don't know what Xinfeng does as an organisation.

Mr MARK COURE: I'm not aware, but I can take that on notice for you and provide you a detailed—

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Have their representatives ever spoken to you about their business?

Mr MARK COURE: Again, I can take that on notice and report back to the Committee.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Minister, just to be clear, my understanding is this group has a range of different businesses that they're involved in, which is not unusual. One of them is development, and one of them is development in your local area. You're saying that you're unaware of who they are or what they do?

Mr MARK COURE: I can take that on notice and provide this Committee—

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Sorry, Minister. You're not answering the question. Surely, you can tell us whether you're aware of the work that's undertaken by this organisation.

Mr MARK COURE: No. No, I'm not. I can take this on notice and provide a detailed response for the Committee.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Have you ever spoken to Con Hindi in relation to planning matters involving developments in Hurstville?

Mr MARK COURE: Con Hindi was a previous councillor. Hurstville was part of my electorate—not anymore. There have been a number of changes to planning codes, most of which I've opposed. In fact, I have currently three petitions out there in the community, campaigning against overdevelopment in my own electorate.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: You're not denying that. So you have, obviously, previously spoken to Mr Hindi in relation to development matters in what was your electorate.

Mr MARK COURE: Perhaps, like I've spoken to many—

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Perhaps? Yes or no.

Mr MARK COURE: Perhaps. I've spoken to many councillors over the years, over the 12 years, about planning—

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Mr Hindi. Is he not a Liberal councillor?

Mr MARK COURE: I beg your pardon.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Was he not a Liberal councillor?

Mr MARK COURE: That is correct.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: So you're saying, in the course of these events—I'm not accusing you of anything. It's not unusual for local members to talk to local councillors in relation to issues that are happening in their area. I'm just surprised that you can't really tell me.

Mr MARK COURE: Perhaps I have. At the end of the day, I've spoken to many councillors, from all types of political persuasions, about the planning matters involving local communities. As I said previously, there are three or four, perhaps, petitions that I've got currently, opposing overdevelopment in my own community.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Can I just go back just quickly to Xinfeng. I'm quite perplexed by this, Minister. How is it that you have taken sponsored travel with this organisation, perhaps with Mr Hindi—we're not sure about that—but you're unable to tell me anything about what they do? What were you looking at on that trip?

Mr MARK COURE: I will provide you with a detailed response. It was six years ago.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Yes. Normally, if they're official, there's itineraries and—

The Hon. PETER POULOS: Point of order: The Minister has outlined that he intends to take these questions on notice. I also note this is budget estimates related to his role as Minister for multiculturalism and seniors. I cannot understand where these questions are aligned with his current responsibilities.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: To the point of order: It's simply not credible that the Minister can't remember anything about this trip. I would encourage the Chair—

The Hon. PETER POULOS: He's made the point to take them on notice.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: —to direct him to tell us what he can remember and to take the rest on notice.

The CHAIR: Any contributions?

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: To the point of order: My view is that these questions are in order and they, basically, do deal with what's in the purview of the Minister's portfolio. These questions were asked last year, and the Minister provided some answers in relation to them. I'm quite shocked that he's surprised that we're asking these questions, and that he has such a lack of preparation in relation to answering them.

The CHAIR: Per what Ms Abigail Boyd was saying, I can't instruct the Minister on how he has to answer the question. He can answer it in any way he wants to or not. As to relevance, I think it is entirely relevant to explore the Minister's activities that relate to his portfolio. Again, he can answer those questions or not. He can take them on notice or not. It's his purview to do that, but I can't instruct him to do anything, except try to answer the question if he can.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Minister, when was the last time you met with or spoke to Con Hindi?

Mr MARK COURE: I saw Mr Hindi at a community event back in February. I didn't speak to him. He didn't speak to me.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: So you've had no other discussions. When was the last time that you would've spoken with Mr Hindi?

Mr MARK COURE: It would've been a while back, last year, perhaps the year before.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: What was the nature of those discussions?

Mr MARK COURE: I don't recall.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: I'm sorry. I keep going back to this Xinfeng issue. Have you ever received donations from Xinfeng Group?

Mr MARK COURE: No. Not that I'm aware of.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: As curious as I am, I won't carry on with that line of questioning, but I would remind you that you are under oath and that you can only take things on notice to the extent you genuinely can't remember them. In any event, let's turn to something different. I understand that my colleague the Hon. Greg Donnelly was asking you some questions in relation to the Ageing and Disability commissioner. I just wanted to pick up on a couple of those. Were you involved in putting forward to the Treasurer the budget submission that the ADC get additional funding?

Mr MARK COURE: Funding decisions are Cabinet-in-confidence. I'll have the secretary, who will be able to add to the response as well—I understand he wrote directly to the Treasurer and to the secretary. But I will check that if that's possible. But funding decisions are Cabinet-in-confidence. It's not appropriate for me to discuss them, obviously, in this forum. But I just want to stress this before I turn to Mr Tidball. He can add to my response. In terms of the budget, I'm advised that Ageing and Disability Commission has adequate budget in the financial year of 2022-2023 to meet operational requirements. There are ongoing discussions between Ageing and Disability Commission, the Department of Communities and Justice—

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Can I stop you there because my question was very specific. I understand if you are not going to tell us because you believe it to be part of the Cabinet-in-confidence process, although I don't really see how that's possible, given it's outside of Cabinet. However, perhaps I can phrase the question differently. Did you speak with Minister Maclaren-Jones, whether with or without the secretary, in relation to asking for additional funding for the ADC?

Mr MARK COURE: Just as I was saying, I have spoken personally to the secretary and to Minister Maclaren-Jones about the importance of finding a good outcome here, and I will do everything I can as Minister for Seniors to ensure—

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: With respect, Minister, I—

Mr MARK COURE: —that the commissioner can do his job in future years.

The Hon. PETER POULOS: Point of order: It is rather discourteous for someone to ask a question and not afford the Minister the opportunity to at least answer it without interruption.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: To the point of order: When the Minister is patently not responding to the question I asked it is within a member's right to direct the Minister back to a relevant question.

The Hon. PETER POULOS: Extending courtesy is common practice.

The CHAIR: I uphold the point of order. Please don't talk over one another and allow the Minister to answer.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Minister, if I could just direct you—I am not interested in you reading from the folder in front of you with talking points.

Mr MARK COURE: Okay.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: I would like you to respond directly to the questions that I'm asking you.

Mr MARK COURE: These discussions are active and I will not let them stop until we have reached an outcome. As Minister for Seniors, I will do everything I can to ensure the commission—

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: That is the same line you gave Mr Donnelly, and I appreciate you're reading it, but it is not particularly helpful for this Committee.

Mr MARK COURE: The commission can do their job in future years. As I've said previously, I'll just have the secretary add to that, if he may?

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: I can pick that up with the secretary, and I will do so this afternoon. I have already had discussions with the secretary about this in the context of the other estimates hearings. Minister, are

you concerned that the commissioner is unable to do its job of protecting some of the most vulnerable people in our State from elder abuse?

Mr MARK COURE: The Commissioner does—and his team do—an amazing job, and I don't know if you heard earlier on, but I've met with him many, many times and visited Parramatta as well.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: I did; I watched, so you can assume—

Mr MARK COURE: I will say this: I've seen firsthand the work they've done, particularly, as you've read no doubt their annual report, I hope. Having met with him on many occasions, discussed issues affecting seniors and work that the Ageing and Disability Commission do, in terms of the budget, I stress that I am advised the Ageing and Disability Commission has adequate budget for 2022-2023 to meet the operational requirements—

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: They do not. Did you watch the budget estimates with Minister Maclaren-Jones? Did you hear the evidence that the commissioner gave about not having sufficient funds past the end of the year?

Mr MARK COURE: The end of the financial year?

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: No, the end of this year.

Mr MARK COURE: Okay. Well, I was told—I've been advised—that they've got adequate budget in this financial year of 2022-23, but I will say this. The secretary of the department will have further information on this and I'd turn to him for that information.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Are you concerned, Minister, about the increasing rates of elder abuse being reported in New South Wales?

Mr MARK COURE: I certainly am, and this is an issue that I spoke about very, very recently. It's an issue that I raised back in June in empowering seniors to address elder abuse. We obviously had World Elder Abuse Awareness Day, which is an opportunity—

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: If I could just interrupt you there, with respect, because I have limited time and you are deviating from the question that I asked. Given your concern for the rising instances of elder abuse being reported, given the very clear evidence that we received from the commissioner in relation to being underfunded, what concrete actions are you taking, as Minister for Seniors, to urgently correct this situation to allow the commissioner to do their job properly?

Mr MARK COURE: Very good question. I have raised this with the secretary already. I've raised it with Minister Maclaren-Jones as well. As I said in my previous answer, it is very important that we find a good outcome here for the commission moving forward.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Can I ask you about the National Construction Code minimum accessibility standards that we talked about in the last estimates when you were new to this role? Did you speak with the building Minister in relation to the building Minister's decision to continue to opt out of the minimum accessibility standards that was made last Friday?

Mr MARK COURE: To opt out, did you say? Did you say "opt out"?

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Opt out or not opt in, however we want to say it. Every other State, except for South Australia—no, South Australia has now committed to minimum accessibility standards, so it is only New South Wales and Western Australia that are refusing to apply the National Construction Code minimum accessibility standards. Did you speak with the building Minister about that before the meeting he went to last Friday?

Mr MARK COURE: I didn't speak personally to him, but if it's okay with you I will take that on notice and provide you with a response.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: In the last estimates you seemed to be unaware of this issue. I think we went backwards and forwards about which Minister was responsible for this, so I think when you say the Minister for Planning you meant perhaps the building Minister, but in any event, I said:

Will you be advocating for New South Wales to change its position on that?

Being this issue. You responded:

I will certainly be asking the Minister for Planning to look into this.

Did you take any action after the last budget estimates to lobby for your Government to change its position on the accessibility standards?

Mr MARK COURE: Whenever I have received representations from seniors' peak bodies, or stakeholders for that matter, regarding this issue, I have made representations then to my ministerial colleagues. I have written to Minister Roberts on this issue, Minister Maclaren-Jones and the former Minister for Fair Trading advocating on behalf of my peaks. This is primarily the responsibility, I understand, of the Minister for Fair Trading, which at the moment is Victor Dominello, but I will continue to advocate on behalf of seniors across New South Wales in regards to the National Construction Code.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: So on this particular issue that was decided last Friday, despite your evidence that you are actively advocating on this issue, you hadn't spoken with Minister Dominello about this. This decision was made last Friday. You've just told me you hadn't spoken with Minister Dominello about this. Writing a letter to a former Minister is not the same as having your eye on the ball and actually knowing what is happening in your portfolio, Minister.

Mr MARK COURE: As I said, this is primarily the responsibility of the Minister for Fair Trading.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Who is looking after the seniors and people who are looking to you to advocate for their rights if it's not you?

Mr MARK COURE: Whenever I receive representations from seniors' peak bodies, or stakeholders for that matter, regarding this issue, I have represented them to my ministerial colleagues.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Okay, but—

Mr MARK COURE: I have written to Minister Roberts, I have written to Minister Maclaren-Jones and the former Minister for Fair Trading advocating on behalf of my peaks. This is a—

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Can you understand that that looks like you're just flicking the problem off?

Mr MARK COURE: Can I just finish? This is a very serious issue and it's something that I'm taking up with the relevant Ministers.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Okay, but you've failed, haven't you, Minister? If you've been advocating for your Government to change its position on the minimum accessibility standards, you have failed.

Mr MARK COURE: Well, I will say this: New social housing developments aim to best practice access and liveability—

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: If I could stop you there, because they are the same talking points that Minister Maclaren-Jones gave us as well. I will come back to this.

Mr MARK COURE: Sorry, can I just finish?

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: That particular talking point has already been read on to the record.

Mr MARK COURE: Mr Chair, if I can just finish please?

The CHAIR: Opposition.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Thank you. Minister, I'm almost done on this line of questioning, but I do want to ask you a couple of questions because I am quite surprised that you were able to give me a very specific month about when you last saw Con Hindi, but you couldn't tell us about when you travelled with him to China. Do you not remember when you travelled to China with him?

Mr MARK COURE: As I said, I will take that question on notice and provide this Committee with a response.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: And you don't recall anything about the trip?

Mr MARK COURE: Again, I will take that question on notice and report back to this Committee.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: And the trip, just to confirm, was in 2016?

Mr MARK COURE: There were five trips in total, as I mentioned before.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Yes. This is the last and most recent one.

Mr MARK COURE: Sorry, repeat the question?

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: This was the last and most recent one. I mean you're taking it on notice, but I just think you're refusing to answer; I don't think you're actually providing information to the Committee.

Mr MARK COURE: All my trips in my capacity as a member of Parliament have been disclosed.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Yes, we went through that in the last round, but, as I said, this is within your portfolio and it's reasonable for us to ask these questions. I am just wanting to understand why you had a very specific recollection of seeing Mr Hindi in February at a function, undisclosed, but you can't give us any more information about the trip that you took with him, which I believe was in 2016?

Mr MARK COURE: Yes. As I said before, all my trips have been declared as a member of Parliament and I will provide this Committee and you personally with a response to that question.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Minister, you do a significant amount of fundraising, don't you?

Mr MARK COURE: From time to time.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Why is it the case that none of that is declared?

Mr MARK COURE: Donations to the Liberal Party are a matter for the Liberal Party.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Right. But you're a local member and you run the fundraisers. Why is it that we have no ability to understand who is donating at the fundraisers that you organise?

Mr MARK COURE: Donations to the Liberal Party are a matter for the Liberal Party.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Yes, that's not the question. When you organise a fundraiser people come and they pay money. Why is it that there's no way for anyone in the community or the public to understand who has donated at the fundraisers that you organised?

Mr MARK COURE: That is a question for the Liberal Party.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Alright, I will check one more time in relation to this, just to try to jog your memory to provide an answer today rather than taking these on notice. You got sponsored travel from—you've listed a Xinfeng group. My understanding is that their full name is the Tangshan Xinfeng Thermoelectric Group. Does that ring a bell to you, Mr Coure?

Mr MARK COURE: Again, all my trips in my capacity as a member of Parliament have been declared. It's been on the record for many, many years. No doubt you've got that record in front of you.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: I'm trying to understand it because it's actually not clear. You've listed it as travel, which is good. It's what you're supposed to do, but you've provided no information about what the contribution to travel was and you've provided no information about who was on the trip or who you met with while you were there. I'm just seeking an elucidation of that declaration.

Mr MARK COURE: As I said, all the trips have been declared and have been for many, many years now.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Just to be clear, you're not going to provide that information?

Mr MARK COURE: I've already said that I'll take that on notice and provide you with an answer.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: I will take you to matters of Multicultural NSW. In your press release on 10 June 2022 you announced the new chair of the Multicultural NSW Advisory Board. Mr Kaldas will also chair the newly announced Religious Communities Advisory Council. Minister, has that advisory council been formally announced and formed?

Mr MARK COURE: The religious advisory council is yet to be formed, the process of which we are working on at the moment. It is an operational matter. We'll keep this Committee up to date every step of the way. I will allow Mr La Posta to add to my response. But the creation of the religious advisory council—or forum, I should say—

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: Is it a forum or a council?

Mr MARK COURE: It's a council, but it aims to enhance the social cohesion and to be a voice for community harmony in New South Wales. It was announced recently on, as you said, 10 June 2022 as part of the New South Wales budget. We've announced that record spending of \$28 million invested in our State's multicultural future. As part of that initiative, the New South Wales Government will establish the Religious Communities Advisory Council, chaired by Nick Kaldas. The terms of reference, as I mentioned before, are being developed and further details will be provided in the near future.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: So it was just announced?

Mr MARK COURE: A couple of months ago.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: And there's nothing to it other than just a mere announcement? There was no content as to what this religious advisory council would look like and what it would do, what its initiatives—

Mr MARK COURE: It will provide a voice around the table more so than what we've experienced previously. We're working on the success of the pandemic in terms of what our religious leaders have done and the job that they've done. This will provide them a voice around the table, chaired by Nick Kaldas, to provide the Government on issues the best advice as possible. The terms of reference haven't been developed yet but stay tuned for an announcement later in the year. As I mentioned previously, I'll have Mr La Posta add to that.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: Before he does, you've created an advisory council. You've announced it, but there's not even a shell. There's nothing of real substance to it. There's no indication as to when it will be formed, what's the time line, how do communities get involved, how do they nominate their representatives. Is there such a broad spectrum of information that communities ought to know?

Mr MARK COURE: It is exciting, the announcement of this. It will be a new formal consultative body to the New South Wales Government, to myself as Minister, to the agency headed up by Mr La Posta—issues of interest and concern to the religious communities in New South Wales. The council will consider a range of issues involving interface between the government and government policies, programs and religious communities. While we'll be guided by the concerns of members in terms of what they've raised, some examples of issues that might be considered by the council include the safety and security of places of worship. This is an issue that comes up from time to time in terms of the groups that I have met over the last nine months and more recently was raised at the Southern Sydney Synagogue in Allawah. You're obviously familiar with that synagogue.

Other issues that could potentially be raised—chaplaincy services in hospitals during emergencies; special religious education in New South Wales schools, which might be of interest to Mr Donnelly; and many others. The council will be comprised of members of the existing Multicultural NSW Religious Communities Forum, which was established by the Government in 2014. In terms of the council itself, it will have a formal time-limited membership, just like the Multicultural NSW Advisory Board. Successful nominees will be formally appointed after, obviously, a proper process has taken place. I will now turn to Mr La Posta to provide further responses.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: Before you do that, there are questions arising from your commentary, Minister. You said members would be existing members of the forum. Which forum? In other words, if the board is going to be from existing membership, so you're not really going out to the community?

Mr MARK COURE: Well, not necessarily. But we want to make sure that we have an advisory council that has best practice, providing advice to the government of the day on a range of issues affecting religious communities. I've just mentioned some of them here.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: The reason I raise this is because big Muslim and Islamic organisations like the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils and ANIC, the Australian National Imams Council—I note that there was a statement from one of its representatives—and the Lebanese Muslim Association as well as the ICPA, Islamic Charitable Projects Association, are asking about this advisory council that was announced three months ago. They have no information as to the process, the progress, the details, the inclusiveness of those big organisations in this board, who will nominate and what's the process. There are a lot of questions out there, Minister, because you've announced it three months ago and people are waiting.

Mr MARK COURE: And rightly so. We will ensure the framework of that committee, of that advisory council will be announced in due course, and that's currently being—

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: When you say "in due course", Minister, in November Parliament concludes sitting. Will you be announcing it in 2023? Is that your hope, Minister?

Mr MARK COURE: Did you say 2023?

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: Yes. Is it your hope that it be announced in 2023?

Mr MARK COURE: I can tell you, 2023 is a long way off. That's an operational matter and I will—

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: Will it be in three months' time? Give a bit of certainty to those listening.

Mr MARK COURE: I assure you, for those watching today on the World Wide Web, that this advisory council will be announced once the framework is formed.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: So you don't have the framework at this point?

Mr MARK COURE: As I said for the fourth time, Mr La Posta will add to my response.

JOSEPH LA POSTA: Mr Moselmane, you know well we have 146 different faiths in New South Wales, which makes us one of the most religiously diverse places on earth. Of each of those 146 faiths, I know there would be numbers of people in each and every faith that would like to sit on this advisory council. What we're doing is we're co-designing how this council should be formed and the issues that they should discuss. I'm really proud of the work the agency has done. I know you mentioned it was three months. It staggers me that it's 1 September today, but this was only announced effective from 1 July.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: I'm just reading from the June press release.

JOSEPH LA POSTA: I'm really pleased—yes, but the funding was only available from 1 July.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: Yes, but I'm just reading from that June press release.

JOSEPH LA POSTA: In the last two months we've had a meeting with some senior religious leaders to help inform this. We're in the finalisation of the drafting of the terms of reference and also the processes around seeking expressions of interest. We'll take that to our religious communities forum. Can I just say, our existing religious communities forum has done an outstanding job through the pandemic of helping lead this State past the Delta and Omicron waves. I am so pleased to have had that frank and fearless advice from all of our religious leaders throughout the pandemic. One of the reasons that we are building this religious communities advisory council is to pay homage to the very important counsel that they give the Government and across government.

I don't preside over all of those different areas that the Minister spoke of before, but one of the things I want to do is improve the conduit between our religious communities and religious leaders and the New South Wales Government, which is why I think the formation of this forum is important. But it's also important that we get it right, because if we don't get it right in terms of the composition of this group and the balance of different voices around the table and the thematic priorities they're going to discuss, then I'm not necessarily sure what its value will be to government. And potentially for the, I don't know, 15 or so people that we make happy by being on the forum, we have just polarised ourselves with 125 other different faiths and religions that aren't on the forum. It's a delicate matter that requires due consideration. Like the Minister said, we are hopeful that, once the co-design process is finished in the coming weeks, we'll then be able to take something out more publicly to the community.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: Thank you.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Returning to thematic priorities, Minister—back to ACPOs. I put a full stop part way through completing our exchange on that, so if we can please return to that? As I left off, I indicated to you, and I'm sure you're aware that, back in March, Ms Smyth confirmed that there were 12 ACPOs that had been put into place in New South Wales. I wish to return to this because I think it is important and it relates in some sense back to my previous line of questioning on a different matter, and that is delivering on promises and honouring undertakings and promises that are made to the public at large. It was three years ago—in fact, over three years ago—that the Government got up and said that it would deliver 56 ACPOs. It was essentially one per police area command or police district, and that would be done. It was a clear-cut promise, no qualifications about it—it would be done.

We, members of the Opposition, were supportive of it. We were very much working with the Government collaboratively, with the inquiry back in 2016, and with crossbench members. We understand the importance of the NSW Police Force as an institution and the way in which it is open and engaged with the community and, most importantly, individual citizens, and deals with matters that are potentially criminal in nature. If we had 12 appointed in March this year, well, we are now at 1 September. As I understand, we are still sitting at 12. That's 44 short of what was promised, and it was a very clear, unequivocal promise a bit over three years ago. How can that be explained?

Mr MARK COURE: To answer your question, I have made representations and met personally with the police Minister on this and written to the police commissioner as well regarding the importance of having aged crime prevention officers in New South Wales. I believe, firstly, it's important for all police officers, not just ACPOs, to have the ability to manage issues relating to older people and elder abuse. You are absolutely right, there are 12 ACPOs that have been located in a number of police commands across New South Wales. I will do everything I can to keep lobbying the New South Wales police to ensure this gets rolled out. It is the responsibility of the police Minister, and I understand his estimates was yesterday. Correct me if I'm wrong.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Minister, you are, in your title, properly recognised and respected as the Minister for Seniors, amongst other things. You are the person who people look up to as the one to engage

with and deal with matters senior. Now, when matters senior—that is, matters to do with seniors in the State, wherever it might be—are announced by the Government, they look to you to deliver on this. They don't—

Mr MARK COURE: And you're absolutely right, and that's why I have taken—

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Can I just finish? They don't look to the police Minister and say, "We are going to follow this through with the police Minister." It's the Minister for Seniors. The Government, when it makes these announcements through its Ministers, takes the credit for it and the accolades and all the rest of it. That's fine. They have their media events and their community consultation and all that. But when it's not delivered—we're talking about over three years since the promise was made.

Mr MARK COURE: As I mentioned, I have taken this up personally with the police Minister, who is the Deputy Premier. I met with him, wrote to him, and wrote to the police commissioner. Obviously, it's an operational matter and it's something that the police commissioner is responsible for delivery of. But I have raised this with the police Minister already. This is an important issue. It's an important issue for me. It's something that I have inherited. But, as Minister for Seniors, I will do everything I can to ensure that this is rectified.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Minister, can I ask you this: When you wrote to the Minister, what was the response from the Minister or Ministers or whoever you engaged with through your communication on this matter?

Mr MARK COURE: If I could take that question on notice and report back?

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: May I ask if there's anyone else at the table who might be able to respond to that question? I mean, it's not a matter that has not been vigorously prosecuted, as you might expect, by the Opposition and other parties at budget estimates over a period of time. Can I just say, with the greatest respect, you must have seen this one coming at you like a freight train. This was prosecuted in detail back in March.

Mr MARK COURE: That is a question I will take on notice. But I just want to—

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: You'll take on notice—

Mr MARK COURE: Can I just finish my response?

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Sure.

Mr MARK COURE: As I've said before, I have made very strong representations and met personally with the police Minister on this. We have written to the police commissioner. The importance of aged crime prevention officers in New South Wales is very important to me. I will continue to do what I can to increase the number of ACPOs across New South Wales. However, further questions regarding the rollout should be directed to the Minister for Police—or the police commissioner, for that matter—and you had them both here at budget estimates only yesterday. I note this is a significant issue. It is something that I have inherited. But this is an issue that I am taking with both hands to take up with the police Minister to ensure that these are rolled out as quickly as possible. I look forward to continuing to work across government to ensure seniors are living happy, healthy and fulfilling lives, and this is an issue that—

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: You've missed out "safe", Minister. I quoted to you this morning your quote from the hearing in May, and safety was at the start of it. This goes to the safety of our seniors. This goes to the fundamental safety of the seniors in this State and has been for a period of time. And all you can say to us is that you'll continue to engage with someone else. What are we to conclude when the Government makes promises over three years ago, doesn't deliver on those, we press it with the person who is the seniors Minister and the response is that you'll continue to try? That's essentially what you are saying: You'll continue to try. Is that what you're saying—you'll continue to try?

Mr MARK COURE: Is that your question?

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Yes.

Mr MARK COURE: My response, as I have said many times previously, is that I have made very strong representations on this matter. I have personally met with the police Minister. I have written to both him and the police commissioner on this matter about the importance of having aged crime prevention officers rolled out across New South Wales.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: But you don't know what they've said in response.

Mr MARK COURE: I will continue to be very strong on this issue.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Minister, I go back to my point that this line of questioning was coming at you like a freight train. Could I tell you that it's bitterly disappointing to have you respond, effectively, in the same way as you did months ago? In effect, in the lapse of time from the last hearing in March—I don't have the precise date, but it might've been the fourteenth—to now, there is no update at all. There is nothing you can add to your or the Government's position on this critically significant issue—an issue that you acknowledge is important and major with respect to our seniors in this State. You cannot add even a dot of information. Do you think that's good enough for the Minister for Seniors?

Mr MARK COURE: I'm not too sure, Mr Donnelly, if that's a question—

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: It is a question.

Mr MARK COURE: —a comment or a statement.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: No, it is a question.

Mr MARK COURE: I can report, as I have many times before, that I met personally, since the last budget estimates, with the Deputy Premier, and Minister for Police, on this matter. It's an issue that I take very seriously, and it's an issue that I want to see rectified.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: If you met with them, what is your recollection of what they said to you in response?

Mr MARK COURE: There is, no doubt, formal correspondence as well. I will take that on—

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: I'm not interested in the formal correspondence. You're a Minister because you're a smart guy and you've got some memory. You would remember, essentially, the exchange that took place when you spoke to those two individuals. What's your recollection of what they said?

Mr MARK COURE: I understand the New South Wales Police Force is looking into the matter. It is an issue that I will continue to raise with the appropriate people, including the Minister for Police and, of course, the police commissioner, and report back to this Committee or to you personally.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: It doesn't need to come back to me personally. This is a budget estimates hearing; it goes back to the Committee.

Mr MARK COURE: I'm more than happy for it to be reported back to you.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: I'm grateful for that courtesy.

Mr MARK COURE: It is an important issue, and I want to stress this. Maybe it hasn't come across. Again, since March I have made very strong representations on this matter to both the Deputy Premier, and Minister for Police, and the police commissioner on the importance of having aged crime prevention officers rolled out.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: And they have done, collectively, diddly squat. That's your evidence today. I mean, it's my word or my phrase—diddly squat. We are talking about a lapse of months between the last budget estimates hearing and this one, and you are not able to add anything, not even some hope that it might happen or, in fact, that there has been suggestions that—

Mr MARK COURE: I disagree, Mr Donnelly. Sorry, I don't mean to interrupt, but I disagree. I have already said a number of times that I will continue to do everything I can as Minister for Seniors to increase the number of ACPOs across New South Wales. I have said that a couple of times. This is an issue that's important for me. It's an issue that is raised through peak bodies on a regular basis. It's an issue that I will continue, as Minister for Seniors, to fight for. I must say that the premise of your question, to suggest that I have not done anything since the last budget estimates, is incorrect.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: In terms of your answers today.

Mr MARK COURE: It's incorrect. I have already said that I met personally with the police Minister on this issue and informed him of the importance of these police officers being rolled out across New South Wales. I also believe, as I have said three times already, that it is important for all New South Wales police officers, not just ACPOs, for example, to have the ability to manage those issues relating to senior people and elder abuse.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: There's no contest over that. I didn't mean to be disrespectful or reflect on you. I accept that you have met, but I'm talking about—and you have correspondence, obviously. You have said that.

Mr MARK COURE: I will table that. I don't have that in front of me.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: You've taken that on notice. But there is nothing to report in terms of progress in regards to the matter. That's the point that I'm emphasising.

Mr MARK COURE: The gist of your question, sure.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: I'll move on to my next set of questions, specifically around the issue of New South Wales ageing plans, which you are well familiar with. With respect to New South Wales, it has had three ageing plans. Its first one commenced in 2012, the second one was from 2016 to 2020 and we're now into our third iteration, which is titled *Ageing Well in NSW: Seniors Strategy 2021-2031*. With respect to the second iteration, the 2016 to 2020 one, can I draw to your attention—you probably know this anyway, but I'll be quite specific about it. That document was reasonably comprehensive. It could have been better, I have to say, in my view but, nevertheless, it was 39-pages long as a document. It set out five key priority areas to be addressed over the duration of the four years of the strategy.

Fast-forward to the current strategy. The current strategy that's on foot at the moment is for a 10-year period. It's looking over a period of 2021 to 2031, and it's only 20-pages long. The strategy document for a decade, looking into the future—or just under a decade—is half that of the document that was produced for a four-year period. With respect to the numbers of priorities, the priorities in the 2016 to 2020 one were in some detail and covered five key areas. That has now been shaved down to four areas under the current plan, which is for a 10-year period. Minister, knowing the manifest range of issues impacting on our seniors, and the demographic change which is staring us all in the face and that we all know very well, how can we take seriously for a moment that the Government takes seriously the issue of seniors, when its current strategy document for a decade is half that of the last iteration, which was for four years, and has got less priorities? How can that be taken seriously?

Mr MARK COURE: There are a couple of points I want to make, if I can. There were quite a few questions there, so I'll take a bit of time. There is a mid-term review—I think it's 2024-25 or 2025-26. There is a mid-term review in terms of the Ageing Well in NSW action plan and seniors strategy. That will occur, no doubt, in 2024-25, I think it is. There are—you're absolutely right—four key focuses or pillars, and we can obviously get to that in a second. Importantly, I'm advised that 90 per cent of the items in the action plan of 2021-22 are either completed or progressing as planned. The director of seniors will add to my response in a very quick second, but it is very important to make it very clear—and I'm sure this will be your supplementary question. But it is important to make clear that the Ageing Well strategy and action plan cuts right across government. That means that representatives from different departments work together to achieve the outcomes for older people. These clusters and agencies are the Department of Communities and Justice, as chair; Premier and Cabinet; Treasury; Health; Transport—

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Police.

Mr MARK COURE: —Industry; Environment; and ageing as well.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Minister, after all we've been through this morning you've got to mention Police. Please mention Police.

Mr MARK COURE: Stronger Communities is in the same cluster as Police, I believe. The point I want to make is the 90 initiatives in the first action plan. Of the 90 initiatives in the action plan, many of them have been delivered already, but I might allow the director of seniors to provide a more detailed response.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Perhaps we can come back to that this afternoon. If I could ask you, Minister, just coming back to this minimum accessibility standards issue, are you aware of what these minimum accessibility standards actually are without reading from the paper?

Mr MARK COURE: In the national code?

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Yes, on what we're asking, what the advocates in this space have been asking for and asking you for in relation to providing minimum accessibility standards.

Mr MARK COURE: Not all of them but certainly some, and that's the wider door trims, for example, little or no steps into a property, at level in terms of accessibilities of power points and windows for that matter, and many other things.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: They're pretty modest requests. Do you think it was a mistake not to have raised this issue with Minister Dominello when he was made the new building Minister in order to try and lobby for a different approach from your Government?

Mr MARK COURE: I will say this: We have written to previous Ministers in the past about this. This is something that is raised personally by many senior peak bodies over the last few months since I've been Minister

for Seniors. It's an issue that I will continue to advocate for. It's a priority to ensure seniors have safe and secure housing that meets their needs. It is an issue that I have raised and will continue to raise.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: The answers you've just given me are very similar to the ones you gave me before, and at that point that's when I asked you whether you've just simply failed then to achieve this outcome, this incredibly important outcome, for the older people of New South Wales, and not just older people but anyone who might want to age in place and for everybody with a mobility issue. Having these minimum accessibility standards implemented in New South Wales would have such a tangible impact on older people. Have you just failed to actually advocate for seniors in this State?

Mr MARK COURE: No, not at all, and I disagree with the question. As you've heard already, I have received representations from peak bodies; I've actioned those representations. It is an issue that is very close to my heart. It's an issue that I will continue to lobby on and lobby for, and I've already said I've written to both Ministers Roberts and Maclaren-Jones and the former Minister, advocating on behalf of the peaks on this particular issue.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: There's a big difference between words and actions. If I ask my children to clean their room and they come back to me and say, "Look, I've met personally with the vacuum cleaner, and I have made some very strong representations. I have written a letter about it. I take this very seriously. I believe that the obligation to clean my room is an incredibly important one for me and I really take this very, very seriously and I will continue"—

Mr MARK COURE: Have you met my eight-year-old?

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: —"to do everything I can," at the end of that I would still say, "Yes, but you've failed to clean your room." What is it that you have actually achieved from all of this writing and all of these personal meetings? What have you actually achieved in terms of providing a beneficial positive outcome for seniors in New South Wales?

Mr MARK COURE: I've taken this issue on with both hands and written personally to the previous Minister for Fair Trading and of course Minister Roberts and Minister Maclaren-Jones on this issue, advocating on behalf of my peak senior groups.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: So they just didn't listen to you?

Mr MARK COURE: I meet my peak bodies on a regular basis, and this is an issue that is raised regularly.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: I know.

Mr MARK COURE: The MACA board has also raised this as well.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Yes, everyone's raising it; everyone wants it.

Mr MARK COURE: This is an issue that I have taken with both hands.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: You haven't, because you didn't even speak to the new Minister before he went to a building Ministers'—whatever that is—party that they had last Friday, a meeting last Friday where your Government, your colleagues, said they weren't going to do this. So you've failed. That's not taking it with both hands. Writing a letter is not taking it with both hands. Having a personal meeting with one of your colleagues is not taking it with both hands. You've failed to actually achieve this. So if you've not achieved this, what tangible outcome have you achieved for seniors in New South Wales?

Mr MARK COURE: I'm not the Minister responsible for the National Construction Code. It's a Fair Trading issue. Already I have, as I've said to you many times before, written on behalf of our many peak bodies.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: You have said that. What is the point of your role if it is not to do more than simply writing letters and having meetings that have no actual tangible outcome?

Mr MARK COURE: My role as Minister for Seniors I take very, very, very seriously, and certainly it's the rollout of our Ageing Well strategy across New South Wales, obviously items that were delivered in our Seniors budget.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Again, sorry, Minister—

Mr MARK COURE: Obviously it's to advocate on behalf of seniors across New South Wales, and that is exactly what we're doing.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Again, my daughter takes her role of cleaning her room very, very seriously and yet the room does not get cleaned. You are the Minister for Seniors. You say you take this role very, very seriously. What actual tangible outcome have you achieved in this role for seniors in this State?

Mr MARK COURE: My role is delivering a brighter future for our seniors across New South Wales. Our vision is for a healthy, active, vibrant ageing population—

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: And safe.

Mr MARK COURE: And safe—

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: It's hard to imagine how it can be safe when the commission is underfunded.

Mr MARK COURE: —and we're delivering quality services for New South Wales seniors in doing this. We've got a number of grants and programs, and I'll go through some of them just for Ms Boyd's question.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: No, I really wish you wouldn't.

Mr MARK COURE: You've asked the question. You've got to allow me to—

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: I've asked the question of what your actual tangible outcomes are. If I'm a person in New South Wales, if I'm looking to you to make an actual significant tangible impact, an improvement in my life, what have you done personally?

Mr MARK COURE: There are a couple of things that we've done, and certainly in this portfolio we've seen a number of rounds of funding programs for combating social isolation during the COVID pandemic, reducing social isolation for seniors groups and so forth. Money—

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Perhaps you could table your speaking notes, Minister.

Mr MARK COURE: You're not going to allow me to finish? That's okay.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: I just think maybe you'd want it tabled because it's not really relevant to what I'm saying or what I'm asking.

Mr MARK COURE: You've asked the question. You don't want me to answer it.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Let's just recap though. Despite taking an issue with both hands, you have failed to get your Government to put in incredibly modest accessibility standards for new builds. You have failed to achieve the level of funding for the Ageing and Disability Commissioner that would allow them to get on with their job, and your response to these failures in front of budget estimates, which is our opportunity to hold you accountable on behalf of the people of New South Wales, is just to keep repeating statements from the folder in front of you—

Mr MARK COURE: That's not true.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: —about all of the words that you've said and all of the letters you've written and the meetings you've had.

Mr MARK COURE: That's incorrect.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: At what point—

The Hon. PETER POULOS: Now let him finish.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: —did you engage with the issue?

Mr MARK COURE: We've got a number of programs right across New South Wales, and you've asked me a question. You haven't allowed me to answer the question, but I will answer, Ms Boyd—

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: I've asked you what you personally have done, not what the department was doing before you came along.

The Hon. PETER POULOS: Allow him to answer the question.

Mr MARK COURE: Ms Boyd, you can't keep interrupting.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: I can and I am.

Mr MARK COURE: I'm sorry, you keep interrupting. I'm not being provided an opportunity to answer some of these questions.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: If you want to answer directly.

Mr MARK COURE: There are a number of programs that we are doing right across New South Wales for seniors, such as the Tech Savvy Seniors program and a number of other programs in terms of combating and reducing seniors' isolation, for example.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Yes, you've said that.

Mr MARK COURE: Digitalising the Seniors Card, for example. This is funding in addition to being spent to support seniors across government in portfolios of Transport—

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: What about keeping seniors safe?

Mr MARK COURE: —Health and Customer Service.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: What have you done to keep seniors safe?

Mr MARK COURE: We have a number of programs in regards to helping our seniors, with tech savvy programs and so forth. As I have said previously, to answer your question about the national code or ACPOs, for example, my previous response stands.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Do you think that you have been a massive disappointment in this role, Minister?

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: A very objective question.

Mr MARK COURE: Let me say this: As Minister for Seniors I take my role very, very seriously.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Yes, you have said.

Mr MARK COURE: And I disagree with the notion of that question. My role is delivering a brighter future for seniors across New South Wales, ensuring that seniors right across New South Wales are a safe, vibrant, active and ageing population, and continue to be healthy. We are delivering quality services for New South Wales seniors—

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Sorry, because you have said this already—

Mr MARK COURE: I need to finish this.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Can I just ask you, what do you do with your eight-year-old when they don't clean their room?

Mr MARK COURE: I need to finish this question.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: I think I will hand over to my colleague.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Okay. I'll just take a couple of minutes. You'll be pleased to know my children have all left home and, in terms of cleaning rooms, they have their own homes and their own rooms to clean.

Mr MARK COURE: Ms Higginson, I've got two kids that you can borrow anytime, if you like.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: I have seven grandkids, I'm fine—and plenty of room cleaning somewhere else. Can I ask you please, Minister, what are you doing to actively combat racism and racist information? And with that, can I ask, have you driven an anti-racism strategy?

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: The answer is no.

Mr MARK COURE: I'm just going to shuffle some paper here, if that's okay.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Shuffle some papers, yes.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: You can freewheel, Minister.

Mr MARK COURE: In regards to tackling racism, there is, firstly, no place for racism or religious intolerance in New South Wales. The Government is committed to tackling all forms of racism. Our commitment to addressing racism and racial inequality is demonstrated through a wide range of legal protections and policies and frameworks, workforce deployment, training programs as well, community awareness campaigns—and I'll touch on them very quickly in a second—community partnerships and many more. In February 2022, Multicultural NSW lodged a submission on behalf of the New South Wales Government to the Australian Human Rights Commission on its proposed National Anti-Racism Framework. That highlights some examples of these New South Wales commitments in tackling racism, to help inform the work of the commission and its proposed framework.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: So, Minister, is that your strategy, to just rely on this kind of mix of things that are happening? Do you accept that as a Minister one of your roles is to have a clear strategy to achieve outcomes, with key performance indicators and measures and we can monitor our success in achieving the outcomes?

Mr MARK COURE: Yes, absolutely. The NSW Community Resilience and Response Plan, or COMPLAN, led by Multicultural NSW, draws together New South Wales agencies and details a coordinated whole-of-government approach to identifying, assessing and addressing risks to community harmony, including risks arising from racist instances and intercommunal tensions.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Minister, what are you doing to address racism towards Asian Australians?

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: A very good question.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Can we just reflect, while you get those notes, on the recent Lowy Institute report that one in three Chinese Australians faces racism?

Mr MARK COURE: There is strong evidence that a clear majority of Australians support multiculturalism and recognise the benefits of multiculturalism, that cultural diversity brings out a way of life—

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Are we doing anything to address racism towards Asian Australians?

Mr MARK COURE: I am aware of a number of other reports that raise concerns about anti-Asian or anti-Chinese sentiment.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: But what are you doing about it?

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: I think the issue is really well known and, more to the point, Minister, the issue is really deeply felt by one in three Chinese Australians. What are you doing, tangibly?

Mr MARK COURE: I'm going to flick this to the agency, Multicultural NSW.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: We don't want any flicking of your answers.

JOSEPH LA POSTA: Ms Higginson, it's a really important question and something we take incredibly seriously. The first thing is, coming back to the earlier part of your question, I was hoping for stronger leadership from the Commonwealth so that we, as a State, could dovetail in with a national framework and a national plan to be able to have a really strong and united position on racism. We do note—and I have met with the commissioner, as has the Minister, the Race Discrimination Commissioner, Chin Tan—that there's been some funding challenges, which I now understand the commissioner at a Commonwealth level has been able to rectify. Regardless, I am really pleased that this agency—which isn't a central government agency, mind you—was able to collect, right across government, a submission on behalf of the New South Wales Government that was endorsed by the Minister and the Premier to take to the commissioner on what our stance is around racial discrimination in New South Wales and the tangible actions that we would like to see made to that. I am happy to table that report in due course.

With respect to our agency, we are incredibly proud of our anti-racism campaign, which is focused on hate, not so much on racism—more of an active word around this. It is called "Remove Hate from the Debate". It is an online campaign that has generated millions of views from young people. It was pivotal during the pandemic to help give young people the tips and tools to be able to negate online hate and racism, and give them tangible things to be able to address these things and not lose their cool, not get caught in these rabbit warrens or the sewers of hate, or any of those things that happen. In addition to that, we've also got an incredible program called COMPACT, which has now engaged over 50,000 young people in this State, which helps build awareness and also skills around leadership credentials. It helps them not be marginalised by divisive forces and all of these other things.

So as an agency, and certainly under this Minister, we have done an incredible amount of work on this and it's something that we are very passionate about. I also note that the Lowy report was raised in the last budget estimates, so it's now—we're talking about this from March, and there are a number of other conflicting reports and research documents that have come out since that about the sentiment of Sinophobic behaviour. A lot of that Sinophobic behaviour was largely linked, unfortunately, to the former President of the United States, who was driving a very divisive force about things such as the "China virus" et cetera. Pleasingly, some of the latest research has seen a reduction in that. But for not one second do we think that a reduction is good enough. We want to work with our communities, partner with our communities, to eradicate any forms of Islamophobic, Sinophobic, antisemitic behaviour that exists in New South Wales.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: Minister, if I may follow up on that question that Ms Sue Higginson asked. I thank Mr La Posta's commentary with regards to Sinophobic behaviour and other behaviour

that we all around the table condemn. For many years now, but especially in the past three years since COVID-19 hit, the Australian Chinese community of 1.2 million across Australia—and a majority are in New South Wales—have been the subject of abuse and virulent racism. The critical question here, Minister, is what action have you taken to address the racism that's targeted specifically at the Australian Chinese community? You know as well as I do that the Australian Chinese community has been hurting for the past three years particularly, but for many, many years of racism due to One Nation's Pauline Hanson and so forth. What constructive action have you taken with the Australian Chinese community to address their wounds?

Mr MARK COURE: There are a couple of things there. Addressing racially motivated hate crime, racial discrimination and racial vilification in New South Wales is something that I am committed to. Multicultural NSW works very closely with the NSW Police Force, Anti-Discrimination NSW and other agencies on issues relating to racial hate. One thing that I do as Minister is meet with our many multicultural groups on a regular basis—most recently through Zoom, but now community forums right across Sydney. We've had community forums in Blacktown, in Oatley and in Liverpool.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: With the Chinese Australian community?

Mr MARK COURE: With everyone. Everyone gets invited. It's an issue not just with—

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: But this question is about the Australian Chinese community. They and the Australian Muslim community are being targeted in recent times. My question is specifically about them, Minister. I understand that you meet them and I know you're involved with many different communities—but specifically, the Australian Chinese community, because they have been under the pump, as they say, and they've been hurt and they continue to be. During the COVID period, they were spat on, they were abused, and they continue to fear to speak out. What have you done to protect them over those years, Minister?

Mr MARK COURE: I meet regularly with many of our community groups and associations, and not just the Chinese community groups but many community groups and associations. I can report that in July 2020, Multicultural NSW worked with the Chinese Australian Forum to organise the Reporting Racism - Know Your Rights online forum. Multicultural NSW, Anti-Discrimination NSW, New South Wales police and Legal Aid NSW all participated in the forum with these Chinese organisations.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: Is that it, Minister?

Mr MARK COURE: In December 2020 Multicultural NSW organised another online forum with Chinese community leaders to discuss the impact of COVID-19.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: So simply online forums? Has there been a targeted campaign, money put into this particular campaign?

Mr MARK COURE: If I could just add, it's important that I add this: I too have also met with Chinese community groups from time to time, and not just Chinese community groups but all community groups right throughout New South Wales—as many as I can, of course—in regard to the issue of racism. This is an important issue that MNSW is addressing through many of their programs. Of course, we've got Remove Hate from the Debate, which is an issue that Mr La Posta has just mentioned, and COMPACT programs and other things. Multicultural NSW, as we know, has a program to remove hate from the debate—to access online content to address the online hate.

The program aims to champion community harmony, counter hateful and divisive narratives and influences, and amplify positive voices online. MNSW is currently reviewing and updating this program, but Remove Hate from the Debate recognises that online hate speech as a common element of all forms of extremism. Mr La Posta has touched on that already in regard to COVID-19 lockdowns. But to address this, MNSW continues to promote Remove Hate from the Debate as a resource. The program empowers young people with the tools to speak out against online hate and use their voices to promote positive messages. There are, of course, key components of this. They are an online resource centre with tools and—

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: So, Minister, you've just had one online forum with the Australian Chinese community. There are 1.2 million. I don't expect you to meet with 1.2 million, but there are big organisations out there that could you physically meet with to address their concerns. I hear that you haven't done that. I want to quickly move to the next question before time runs out. Islamophobia is an issue that we've raised many times, and we'll raise it with Mr La Posta shortly. The reality is that thanks to the work of Mariam Veiszadeh with Islamophobia Register Australia in connecting the data on the various incidents, physical and online, we know that last year there were 247 incidents against Muslims. That compares with 349 incidents published in the 2019 report and another 243 in the 2017 report. Significant abuse and attacks on Australian

Muslims have been recorded by that organisation. What has Multicultural NSW done to address those concerns? Those concerns are serious, Minister, and they must be addressed.

Mr MARK COURE: We have two programs, and I just want to talk about the COMPACT program in a second. But MNSW has funded the Islamophobia Register Australia—\$500,000. We are strongly committed to tackling this issue. That \$500,000 under the COMPACT program is to deliver advocacy and support to victims of Islamophobia from 2021 and 2024. This project will also work with victim groups, as well, to develop shared strategies to combat racism and hate. The register project that you've mentioned already is one of 24 COMPACT partnership projects funded to 2024. Islamophobia Register Australia and the Charles Sturt University are both members of the COMPACT alliance, and that alliance is now a statewide network of allies made up of over 80 partner organisations who are all committed to standing up united against racism, hate, fear and division. Also funded on the COMPACT is the national anti-racism charity All Together Now. It has delivered community awareness and training on the dangers of far-right extremism for frontline youth workers across New South Wales.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: We'll ask those questions of Mr La Posta. We've only got a few minutes.

Mr MARK COURE: If I can just say in regard to COMPACT, COMPACT is the flagship Multicultural NSW program—

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: We'll ask Mr La Posta.

Mr MARK COURE: —combating, if I can, racism and hate. The program has been independently evaluated as a first of its kind initiative that has made significant progress towards its aims of building social cohesion and community resilience in a short period of time.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: I thank the Minister for his answer, and we'll certainly ask Mr La Posta to elaborate on those things.

Mr MARK COURE: I might just ask—I now turn to—

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: Before you turn to it, I have one final question before I pass to my colleague. I want to go back to the religious council that you wanted to form. Do you expect the religious council to report to you, Minister, or to the CEO of Multicultural NSW?

Mr MARK COURE: It'll be reporting to Nick Kaldas as chair. I, from time to time, will be meeting Nick Kaldas personally. I will certainly be taking a very active—

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: So it will be reporting to the chair?

Mr MARK COURE: Yes, I'll be taking a very active interest.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: But he's the chair, so the chair would have to report to somebody. Who does he report to?

Mr MARK COURE: The chair will report to Mr La Posta and, of course, I'll get briefs as well.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: Under the framework, will it be to the Minister?

Mr MARK COURE: This is something that I'm taking very, very seriously. The guidelines of the creation of this advisory council—

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: So it's not clear at the moment.

Mr MARK COURE: —will be developed over the next few weeks and months ahead.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Minister, following today's hearing, are you prepared to organise a meeting with the Treasurer, the Minister for Police, the police commissioner, the secretary and yourself to finally resolve the long outstanding issue of the failure to appoint the outstanding 44 ACPOs in New South Wales?

Mr MARK COURE: I make this pledge: that I will again raise this with the New South Wales police Minister. I will raise this with the Treasurer as well. If I've got to organise a meeting with those individuals that you have raised, I will certainly do that.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: What would be your timetable for doing that?

Mr MARK COURE: As soon as possible.

The CHAIR: Are you finished?

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: I think probably for the moment, yes.

The CHAIR: Questions from the Government?

The Hon. PETER POULOS: Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon, Minister. Just before we wrap up for lunch, did you wish to update the Committee with any further information on an uninterrupted basis?

Mr MARK COURE: Thank you, Mr Poulos.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: And you've got 15 minutes.

The CHAIR: You've only got 15 minutes.

The Hon. PETER POULOS: Yes, go for it.

Mr MARK COURE: The secretary has one issue, and then I have a further issue as well.

MICHAEL TIDBALL: Thank you, Chair. If I may elaborate on my earlier evidence in response to a question asked by Mr Donnelly in respect of the Australian Institute of Family Studies' National Elder Abuse Prevalence Study, it is the case that—and I apologise for this, Mr Donnelly—I was unaware of the MOU that existed with the Department of Justice, now the Department of Communities and Justice, which was executed at the time when that study commenced. The department provided \$200,000 of funding to contribute to that study. I've briefly read the MOU during the morning tea break, and I think part of it was very much focused on jurisdictional input. I will certainly follow up and be able to expand on what participation took place as well as any briefing processes which were initiated.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Thank you, Minister.

Mr MARK COURE: I've just got one item, Mr Chair. The MNSW advisory board appointments of Sam Elmir and Sally Betts were made by Cabinet before I was sworn in as Minister for Multiculturalism. I did not sign off on the appointments of Sally Betts and Sam Elmir. The previous Minister for Multiculturalism and the Governor signed the ExCo minute on 15 December 2021. I can confirm I did sign a congratulations letter to all three new appointments on 17 January 2022, and Mr La Posta has addressed the process of the board appointments earlier in the hearing today. It is a mischaracterisation for Mr Moselmane to say that I signed off on the appointment of these two individuals.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister, for coming today. I note you've taken a lot of questions on notice, and you'll have 21 days to respond to those. The Committee will start again at two o'clock.

(The Minister withdrew.)

(Luncheon adjournment)

Mr ROBERT FITZGERALD, Commissioner, Ageing and Disability Commission NSW, on former oath

The CHAIR: We will get started. Let's crank the wheel. Hopefully the wind's blowing and we've got some electricity coming through. It's overcast at the moment, so you've got no solar panels working. Opposition questions?

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Thank you all for returning this afternoon. Welcome and thank you, Mr Fitzgerald, NSW Ageing and Disability Commissioner, for joining us this afternoon. It's much appreciated. On behalf of the Opposition, and I'm sure I speak on behalf of all members of the Committee, we are most grateful for the very important work you do for and on behalf of some of the most vulnerable people in this State over the course of your term but well and truly before that over a number of years.

ROBERT FITZGERALD: Thank you.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: My first lot of questions do, in fact, commence with you, Commissioner, and probably don't come as a surprise in that they relate to some comments you made on Tuesday before another budget estimates hearing, Families and Communities, and Disability Services. If I can just give a context to this, we did have the Minister for Seniors this morning. You may or may not have had an opportunity to see or hear some of that or none of that or receive some briefing, but it doesn't much matter. My questions do primarily go to matters covered on Tuesday. I will touch on some of the Minister's reflections today. I'll identify them with you to either comment, if you wish, take on notice or deal with as you see fit. Commissioner, with respect to the comments made earlier this week by you, I'm going to be drawing specifically on some pages from the Hansard transcript that you may or may not have in front of you. Principally, they're on pages 47 to 49 of the transcript. I think you would probably have a pretty good recollection of the exchange. Ms Abigail Boyd was asking you some questions, and the questions went back and forth.

The conundrum we find ourselves in, which arose from our questioning back and forth with the Minister today, is an acknowledgement of an issue with respect to appropriate funding for you as a commissioner to be able to operate the commission at a standard and an efficiency that equates with at least what's required under the statute or better. The conundrum is, it appears from your reflections and utterances on Tuesday, that that's not able to be done by the commission. But, in response, we heard back today from the Minister for Seniors—I'm paraphrasing him slightly—that things are essentially satisfactory to get by—once again, my words—for the current financial year, the budget year 2022-23. The issues appear to be beyond that. I'm wondering, first of all, if you could respond to that.

ROBERT FITZGERALD: I didn't and haven't been briefed in relation to Minister Coure's statements this morning, but my comments would be consistent. Just going back a little bit, if we understand, the budget that was ultimately approved for the commission was always inadequate for the fulfilment of the statutory functions to the level required by Parliament in relation to both older people and people with disabilities. As I indicated on Tuesday, the then Minister, Mr Gareth Ward, and to a lesser degree Minister Sidoti, were advised of that very early in the piece. Minister Ward, through his intervention, obtained a \$3.5 million viability grant over four years from the department, not through the Treasury processes. That grant finishes at the end of this year, and DCJ has advised that that grant is not forthcoming. So there's an immediate reduction of \$1 million in the budget from this year, so the cliff is immediate.

The actual underlying budget, however, has always been inadequate. In relation to this year, the reason we were able to sustain our activities this year is, firstly, the \$1 million grant that I've referred to, which ceases this year. Secondly, we've got carry-forward funds, which we've prudently managed in the anticipation that we would not have been successful in the budget bids last year. We've been unsuccessful in every budget bid that we've put up, no matter what it's been for, over the last three years. This year, absolutely it is the case that I've indicated to both Ministers and to the secretary that we will be able to operate the commission on the basis of the \$1 million grant from the department and carry-forward funds. However, going forward, at this stage there is no guarantee of a \$1 million grant going forward and there will be no carry-forward funds, so the cliff becomes real. But the cliff has been known for three years.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Thank you, Mr Fitzgerald. That's helpful. May I go back to the start of what you just described, and that is the shortfall or the deficit in the amount of funding, which was, as I understand, understood to be the funding that the commission would receive to be able to operate and carry out its statutory responsibilities. With respect to the original amount and then the discovery of a lesser amount, were you consulted over that process of the movement from a figure, which you understood would be the figure, to the lesser figure?

ROBERT FITZGERALD: No. I arrived on 1 July, Monday morning. At nine o'clock an official of the DCJ came into my office and welcomed me, and then said, "We've got bad news." The bad news was that the indicative budget of \$29 million over four years had been reduced to \$13.9 million whilst the legislation was going through the Parliament and without any consultation by me at that time. On the very first day in the first hour, I was made aware of that budget. We proactively dealt with both the Ministers and the department to try to put in place what I then believed would be a stop-gap pressure. I had no expectation that three years later a new agency, fully supported by all members of Parliament and meeting a clearly emerging need, would be struggling for its effectiveness in terms of its finances. That was never contemplated by me, even when I heard about the reduction in the budget.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: If you're not at liberty to say, you may in fact make that point, but in terms of being informed about the reduced quantum that you would have before you to operate the commission, was any explanation given to you beyond the fact—I do find the actual explanation curious—that as the bill was passing through the Parliament that amount was fixed, using perhaps my own words? There was no explanation beyond that?

ROBERT FITZGERALD: There has been no explanation at all.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: At all?

ROBERT FITZGERALD: Not at all. No-one in DCJ has tried to support the reduced budget. After all, they were the ones that put forward the substantial budget. At no stage during the last three years have I been advised as to why that occurred. Nobody believes that it was an appropriate decision. Nevertheless, it was the case, and, as I say, the legislation passed on the Thursday before I started on the Monday. So the reduced budget was well known to Government at the time that the legislation was being passed by both the lower and upper Houses.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: I don't mind if you move through this reasonably quickly. I'm wondering if you could provide a summary of your efforts, as the commissioner, in that subsequent period—we're talking about the end of June 2019, 2020, 2021 and now into 2022—to seek essentially a recovery of, if not all, a good part of that to enable an opportunity—this is still your judgement—for that amount of money or thereabouts necessary to carry out the role of the commissioner and the commission.

ROBERT FITZGERALD: In very brief terms, I've briefed the seven Ministers that I've dealt with who have joint administration of my commission. As you know, the Ageing and Disability Commission, or my Act, is jointly administered by the Minister for Seniors and the Minister for disability. In relation to each of the seven Ministers, I've advised them of the circumstances in the terms that I've advised you on Tuesday and today.

Secondly, each and every year we've put in bids to enhance the budget. Last year we worked with the finance division of DCJ and Treasury in developing what's called a demand funding model. A demand funding model is a predictor of growth agreed to by Treasury. Therefore, future budgets should be determined in accordance with our pre-approved growth rates. It doesn't apply in most parts of DCJ, but it does apply in some aspects of Justice. I was, unfortunately, overoptimistic in the belief that if you'd worked it up with Treasury and finance in DCJ, you'd have a reasonable opportunity of success. Again, the demand funding model in relation to the commission and the Official Visitors scheme failed. Thirdly, of course, I've had discussions with the previous secretary and the current secretary in relation to these matters. As I've indicated to you, this has been a three-year task. On that KPI, I've failed miserably because we haven't had any sustained solution, notwithstanding the fact that I acknowledge that the secretary is working on that at the moment, but that's been the history so far.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: I acknowledge the secretary's work in that respect. There's definitely a cognisance and understanding of this predicament and the effort being exerted, as I understand and explained, to try and recover this situation. Perhaps if I invite the secretary to make any comments that flow from the reflections of the commissioner about trying to resolve this because we have an insoluble problem that's now running into its fourth year. We heard the Minister's response today. I'm not going to reflect on his response. But, clearly, it seems to be Treasury primarily that needs to grasp what needs to be dealt with here.

MICHAEL TIDBALL: Thank you, Mr Donnelly. I have the advantage of having known Mr Fitzgerald for a number of years. Early on, after I commenced in February, in the first—I don't know when it was, Robert, we met. I understand the issues, fundamentally, in terms of the priorities that, as secretary, Mr Donnelly, I regard as sacrosanct. A statutory responsibility pertaining to people who are vulnerable, abused, exploited is fundamental. It's a fundamental duty in the decisions I make and the oversight which I exercise as secretary. There was a budget process, and it's on the record that there was not what I would refer to as a re-baselining of the budget.

I think the cornerstone of this is we are talking here about a statutory function. The ADC Act is very clear about the responsibilities and the remit of the commissioner. I take it as my duty in the decisions I make to

ensure that the commissioner is resourced commensurate with the need to carry out those statutory responsibilities. So there will be and there is an absolute focus on working with Treasury to ensure that the organisation, beyond 2022-23, which I'll come back to, is appropriately resourced. If it were not the case—let me put it in the positive. I will look at every avenue beyond 30 June 2023 to ensure that the additional for core operational funding—there's a slight reworking of the figures recently, between \$6.75 million and \$6.9 million—that those funds at least are made available to allow Mr Fitzgerald to carry out and fulfil his statutory responsibilities.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: Mr La Posta, the at last occasion when we asked questions, at the last budget estimates, I raised with you the dilemma and the issues that concerned the community in Griffith and, in particular, the concerns that were raised by Carmel La Rocca. You indicated that you would talk to her or meet with her?

JOSEPH LA POSTA: I did, yes.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: What happened?

JOSEPH LA POSTA: Complicated, Mr Moselmane. Effectively, the Griffith multicultural council wants a home. We're supportive of that. We would love all of our community organisations to be able to have a home. We'd love for them to all have places to be able to congregate, to prepare meals, cook food, all of those sorts of things. That requires us, obviously, with many of those facilities and assets—Ms Higginson raised Crown land before. That's always something that we look at, but the majority of it's controlled by local council. So I spoke to the general manager around it.

It would be fair to say that the general manager had some similar points of view to Ms La Rocca around the process that had been, potentially, followed and also some reasonably different points of view around where they had sought to provide access for the Griffith multicultural council to some of those facilities, but those facilities were either deemed by the multicultural council or Ms La Rocca as being too expensive or unsuitable for her. So I don't really have a satisfactory outcome to be able to report to you on. But I'm also very mindful that it's not really my responsibility; it's more a matter for local council. But I'll continue to advocate for her and continue to work with her and also the local council.

What I am pleased to report, though, Mr Moselmane, is that Carmel and the excellent volunteer team down there have their Griffith Multicultural Festival coming up. I'm really proud that our agency's been able to support her with \$14,000 to be able to celebrate the wonderful multiculturalism that exists in the Griffith area and the incredible contribution that our migrants have made to that regional township. Both the Minister and I are confirmed to go down there and, obviously, go to that festival but also meet with the relevant stakeholders as well and make sure that their broader needs are being understood and met.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: I thank you for that report back with Ms La Rocca. She is very frustrated about the fact that the multicultural community groups there cannot get a home, as you say, or a centre. The council has not been so helpful, she tells me. You may have a different interpretation of things. But, certainly, nothing's been delivered to them. She tells me that they only now operate from a makeshift place. I did meet with her a few times. When I did meet with her, it was at her own office. There's no facilities. The multicultural communities there are really and truly growing. Not just New South Wales but federally, we ask all those migrants that want to apply to come to Australia to go to the regions. We push them to go to places like Griffith and Wagga and everywhere else—

JOSEPH LA POSTA: My family included, Mr Moselmane.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: Yes. But we don't provide the facilities and services to them that we ought to. It's not just the State Government, but it's local government and Federal as well. So they are in desperate need of facilities and services. I just happen to have an opportunity to visit the local mosque there, that's called the Riaz mosque, in Griffith, and had the opportunity to meet with a cross-section of members of the community, whether they're Arabic speaking, from the subcontinent. There was about seven, eight different backgrounds I was able to speak to.

JOSEPH LA POSTA: How wonderful.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: They all had problems. They all had issues. They're all happy that they are in Australia but had issues in terms of settlements, housing, translation, interpreting, health and a whole spectrum of things. I know you can't resolve it. But, certainly, the multicultural volunteers that are there could help a lot to those members of those communities if a facility and some supporting facilities, some supporting resources are provided to people like Ms La Rocca to be able to assist.

JOSEPH LA POSTA: Yes. I think one of the things the agency does well is provide festival and event funding, which is good because that's a part of the story of multiculturalism in terms of the continuum, and also

project and program funding, Mr Moselmane, which is another part—part-time resources, language services, all of those different things that we collaborate with our community. What we don't do, and I think there is an opportunity for the future, is partner on small community infrastructure projects. We rely on things like the Community Building Partnership or infrastructure projects more broadly across Government to be able to sort of meet that need and cater for that need.

I can't talk with specificity about Carmel's scenario because, like I said to you, the local council provided a very different story, that they did try and interject and help, and the terms they offered weren't suitable to Ms La Rocca—rightly or wrongly; it is not my place to judge—but I did advocate on Carmel's behalf with the council and the most senior members of the council, including the CEO/general manager. So I guess, in a sense, what I am open to is a broader conversation around how the agency can look to partner more with some of those community infrastructure projects, community halls, so they've got kitchen facilities or food prep facilities or small offices to be able to meet all those things, but it's a bit of a work in progress.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: Is Multicultural NSW in a position to, for example, have a placement officer or an officer that would assist in multicultural communities based in, say, the Griffith local government department or local government building?

JOSEPH LA POSTA: It's a good philosophical question. At the moment we partner with organisations, like the Ethnic Communities' Council, that are based in Wagga, the Illawarra and Hunter, Sydney and Waterloo, to help—

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: So you could partner with Griffith—

JOSEPH LA POSTA: Well, the interesting thing about Carmel—I mean we could talk all day about this specific example—is that they are not actually a member of the Ethnic Communities' Council forum, so they choose to sort of sit out on their own and work under their own auspices. All the other ethnic communities' councils, like the four that I just mentioned, we actually do have ongoing partnership funding with.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: So if they were to join the Ethnic Communities' Council, that would help them?

JOSEPH LA POSTA: It potentially would help them, but it is not my place to say whether that is a worthwhile or otherwise exercise; that is really the Committee's decision to make. But there are examples where we do provide funding to the Ethnic Communities' Council, such as the Wagga one, to help supplement exactly what you're talking about, which is salaries and wages, that then help them deliver the services like the Wagga community garden and some of the other things that are happening down there. Likewise in the Illawarra, some of our funding goes to help them support refugees and asylum seekers in that region, some of the program funding, grant writing, capacity building, supporting organisations to become non-government registered or not-for-profit organisations so they can apply for funding and that sort of stuff.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: I will send her the transcript of this conversation.

JOSEPH LA POSTA: Please.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: But what can she take out of this? Is there some light from Multicultural NSW? Is there something that you have provided elsewhere in other local government areas that you can replicate in Griffith?

JOSEPH LA POSTA: Mr Moselmane, she can take out the fact that she has got now \$14,000, which is I think the largest funding investment we've made in her organisation—that is the first thing—to support them with the multicultural festival. If that is a fundraising opportunity for that council, that's wonderful because that will hopefully help them and support them into continuation, and you have my undertaking that when I am out there in October at her request, even though the Griffith and Wagga festivals are on the same day, which I can't explain but they are, I will meet with her, work with her and continue to advocate on her behalf with the local council.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: Thank you so much; I appreciate it.

JOSEPH LA POSTA: Not a problem.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: Just going on to general questions, if I may: Can you tell me whether you, as CEO, report to the Premier or do you report to the Minister?

JOSEPH LA POSTA: Been reading the Act, Mr Moselmane? Section 7.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: Yes. Just out of curiosity.

JOSEPH LA POSTA: It's a joint report, so the Premier holds the Act but delegates the responsibility to the Minister, unless I am incorrect in that regard, so my direct report is to the Minister for Multiculturalism. However, there is also a direct conduit into the Premier's office and a delegate in that office that we also engage with frequently.

MICHAEL TIDBALL: If I may assist the Committee, as I understand it, it is a specific relationship with the Minister pursuant to section 7 of the Multicultural Act.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: Right, so where does the Premier then come in? According to the Act, the Premier and the Minister for Multiculturalism are equally responsible for Multicultural NSW, or something to that effect. I can look at the Act; I did have it here somewhere.

MICHAEL TIDBALL: My recollection of the Act, which I read recently, is that the employment relationship—and we can clarify it for you in case I am wrong, but section 7 has the reporting relationship of the CEO to the Minister. That's my memory of it.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: Okay. If you could just take it on notice—

JOSEPH LA POSTA: I am happy to take it on notice, and I think, Mr Moselmane, what you are referring to historically is that there are some examples in previous governments where the Premier has assumed the responsibility as being the Minister for Multiculturalism. There are examples you're probably familiar with in that instance. In this instance, that is not the case; the Minister for Multiculturalism is clearly Minister Coure, but there is an element of our Act where the responsibility is shared and, to be frank, the former and the current Premier's office are obviously very interested in the work that we're doing and very engaged, and at times, to be honest, have been very supportive as well.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: And the board is answerable to the Minister?

JOSEPH LA POSTA: The advisory board provides advice to the chief executive and to the Minister—

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: Right.

JOSEPH LA POSTA: It's an advisory board; it's not a fiducial board.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: Okay, so it is again not to the Premier.

JOSEPH LA POSTA: What would typically happen is this, and this links back to your question about the Religious Communities Advisory Council: We have an advisory board meeting. If they raise issues that we think are of significance and concern, the Minister is briefed and at times, if there are significant concerns, as there was in the pandemic, we will also brief the Premier on those matters. Similarly with the Religious Communities Advisory Council.

One of the things that we don't want to do is tell our religious leaders what they should and shouldn't discuss, so what we're trying to do is build a co-design process with them to allow them the opportunity to pick up the thematic priorities that they think are important. Some of those, Mr Moselmane, are going to be under our direct responsibility. Many of them aren't. But what we're trying to do is create an avenue where our religious leaders feel like they have a direct voice into government and, therefore, if we are talking about burials or places of worship, or we're talking about cemeteries or we're talking about discrimination laws or we're talking about religious freedoms or voluntary assisted dying as thematic priorities, our religious leaders can come together.

The voluntary assisted dying one is a good example where the bill has been passed by Parliament, but the work of NSW Health in conjunction with Multicultural NSW and our religious groups is critical in terms of the implementation and the success of that bill and how it is implemented into the community or otherwise. That is one of the many reasons why we have set up this council, to help with that. On issues of significance, what we will do is we will then brief the Minister and brief the Premier on what the concerns of that council are because some of the things are beyond the remit of our Minister, but they would be considered to be whole-of-government challenges or issues.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: With regard to the determination as to who was to be appointed on the board—

JOSEPH LA POSTA: Advisory board or community?

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: Religious advisory council—

JOSEPH LA POSTA: Religious Communities Advisory Council.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: You indicated that you ran the process.

JOSEPH LA POSTA: I haven't run the process yet. Is that what you're talking about, the advisory board or—

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: Right, that you would run.

JOSEPH LA POSTA: Where we're up to at the moment is there are a select number of stakeholders from many different faiths that have done a significant amount of work.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: Yes.

JOSEPH LA POSTA: I'm sure you're familiar with some of the people that have been involved—many members of Parliament are. What we need to do is respect the very important work that they've done to date and pay homage to that, build on that thinking and make sure with our mindset that we can apply an objective lens that some of them wouldn't have the responsibility to think through, and my team and I have already met with that group and we've explained to them some of the thinking that is probably better than what we thought and then some of the challenges that we see as an agency, if we proceeded with that version, going forward. That meeting was really productive. They gave some strong suggestions about what they think the terms of reference should be and also the selection criteria of the council members, which we have now sent back to that group for their feedback.

Once we get the feedback of the group, we'll take that to our broader religious communities forum, which has a composition of over 250 members from 150 different faiths and make sure that they see a reflection of themselves in that, regardless of the people that are appointed on to the board. Once that is done, we will brief the Minister, we will run an expression of interest process at arm's length from the Minister's process, and then Chair Kaldas, myself and other suitably qualified personnel will go through the selection process and put a recommendation up to the Minister for the Religious Communities Advisory Council.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: What about the process where you engaged those two councillors, for example?

JOSEPH LA POSTA: That is the advisory board, so it is a separate matter.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: And you ran the process yourself as the CEO?

JOSEPH LA POSTA: So an open expression of interest process—

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: The reason I am asking, to get to the point of it, is that it is seen as an independent process. How independent is that process when it is done in-house?

JOSEPH LA POSTA: Mr Moselmane, I appreciate the optics. I can't contest the point that you made before. What I need to be clear on is I make a recommendation to the Minister; I don't appoint the advisory board.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: Yes. But, based on your recommendation, the Minister accepts or rejects, obviously.

JOSEPH LA POSTA: Correct.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: But we're told—for example, I will just look at the press release. Merit-based selection process—and elsewhere he says it's an independent process. When I think about something as independent, it means it's at arm's length with the actual organisation. So an independent organisation outside the authority or outside Multicultural NSW would be assessing and then advising you, then through you to the Minister, that these people would be recommended.

JOSEPH LA POSTA: That's your view. I respect your view and I respect you. My thinking is the independence is the public servants who are there who are apolitical. It's their obligation to find the appropriate people. If you're saying that you think the public servants that are there to find the appropriate people are clouded or that their judgment can't be objective—

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: I'm just asking questions. I'm not implying anything.

JOSEPH LA POSTA: I clearly am very passionate about the objectivity of the advisory board members. The fact that we are having this discussion—I understand why we're having this discussion, but I also think the people that are on the advisory board are eminently qualified to be on the advisory board. There's no-one that I sit with on that board and think, "Goodness gracious me, how did they get there?" You're saying, "Was the process for them to get there influenced?" I'm telling you that the process that we ran up and to the recommendation of the Minister was not, but at the end of the day the advisory board is determined by the Minister with a recommendation to Cabinet and then signed off by the Governor. What I think from that point is inconsequential because it's ultimately the decision of the Government to make that point.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Back to, if I could, Mr Fitzgerald and specifically, if you don't mind, some questions around the Ageing and Disability Abuse Helpline—that, of course, was preceded by the elder abuse hotline that was the original vehicle set up of contacting a government body, if I could describe it that way, following a recommendation from the committee inquiry undertaken in the Legislative Council back in 2016, reporting in June. It's evolved from that into now what is the helpline. I'm wondering if you could do the following. The 2021 annual report—which I've got a copy of in front of me and you may or may not have it at your disposal; I can pass this across if you like—specifically pages 6, 7, 8 and 9 helpfully go through and give some detail, at least for that financial year, about matters to do with calls and reports et cetera.

I'm wondering, Mr Fitzgerald, if you'd like to elucidate on anything that's there but particularly the matter of the growth and expansion of numbers of people seeking to make contact to the helpline and what you think may be the necessary capacity to expand that over time to deal with what appears to be a growing, shall we say, inclination, desire, impulse to report matters of elder abuse. Can I just say the matters of abuse with respect to people with disability I'm not wishing to dismiss for a moment, but we're particularly focusing on elder abuse for the moment.

ROBERT FITZGERALD: The Elder Abuse Helpline, as you rightfully state, was established for about seven years. It was funded by DCJ and the provider was Catholic Healthcare and it did an extraordinary job. It not only ran the helpline but it also provided some resources in relation to elder abuse more generally. That was brought into the commission, as you've indicated, and is now known as the ageing and disability helpline. Just to understand that a little bit further, there is a national elder abuse helpline and there is a national disability helpline by another name. In relation to the elder abuse helpline, those calls are automatically pinged to us in New South Wales. They're not triaged. They come immediately from the national helpline. Our call centre picks up calls directly to our own line and also the national line.

There's been an increase in relation to helpline calls. In the first year of our operation it was—I'll just round these—10,500. The next year was 13,000 and this year it's back to 12,500—rounded—largely because of the pandemic. To understand the helpline, the helpline is exactly what it sells. It's not an intake line per se, although it has that function. About 78 per cent of the matters at the moment are in relation to older people—the balance in relation to people with disability. In relation to the helpline itself, it does a number of functions, including actually trying to resolve matters. So most of the matters we deal with are resolved by the helpline within seven days of receipt by the helpline.

We've structured it in a way that it doesn't end up like child protection helplines, where there is the potential for matters to be unallocated. That's been a history in the department when it was DoCS and FACS and now DCJ. Our aim is when a person calls that line they will actually receive assistance immediately—either the answering of inquiries or the formalisation of a matter into what's called a statutory report—and we'll try to resolve that matter if it is possible. I'm not at all sure we can sustain that. I'm not at all sure that, if the resources don't keep pace, we can do that. I've indicated to the Ministers throughout that I will not allow the commission to go down the line of child protection, where you end up with very substantial matters being unallocated or barely allocated. Nevertheless, that's simply a resourcing issue.

In relation to the helpline, the other point that I'd make is we can't control demand. If the Government establishes agencies such as ours, as the secretary has indicated—frontline agencies with statutory functions where you cannot control the demand—then you have to in fact simply resource it accordingly. Otherwise you do go back to what happened in the early days with the child protection arrangements and none of us want to go back to that point. We expect that the helpline matters will continue to increase. We believe it'll increase by about 10 per cent per annum after the pandemic—well, we're still in the pandemic—settles, but I have no way of determining what that growth rate will be.

Without trying to go on, the most important figures, however, are not the actual helpline calls. It's those that turn into matters. They are inquiries and statutory reports. Just in relation to statutory reports, these are formal reports that require action. Financial year 2020 was 2,300; financial year 2021 was 3,500; and financial year 2022 was 3,900. The work that we did on the demand funding model gives an indicator of growth for the whole of the agency's activities: helpline, community support and investigations. At the moment we have indicative growth rates for the commission. That's a longwinded way of saying the helpline is the entry point but the really hard work is the statutory reports, which have grown considerably each and every year. That will continue for the reasons I outlined on Tuesday.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Forgive me because I probably should know the answer to this but I don't, not specifically. With respect to the criteria that, once met—or the tripwire that crosses over to make it a statutory requirement to be reported, what are they or where do we look to find out what those specific—

ROBERT FITZGERALD: It's in the Act itself. I should just qualify this. There is no formal definition of abuse within the Act. The term "abuse" in our Act takes what a reasonable person—or the common man, as it used to be called—would interpret it to be. So it's not a statutorily defined matter. The second thing is abuse covers psychological abuse, financial abuse, physical abuse, neglect, exploitation and sexual abuse, all of which we deal with for both older people and people with disabilities. The threshold for it becoming a statutory report is when our staff—well, technically I do but they do—believe there is a risk of or there is actual harm being occasioned to an older person or a person with a disability. Again, there's no more precise definition of that.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Essentially, with a person who has a role of dealing with these calls and managing them, their experience enables them to elicit, through that conversation back and forth, sufficient information to make that best judgement possible about the matter?

ROBERT FITZGERALD: These are all based on best judgements. I'm confident that we make good assessments in relation to what should be an inquiry or what should be a statutory report. One thing I should just point out to you—you would be aware of this—this is a will and preference jurisdiction. That is, the views of the person affected, both the person with disability and/or the older person, and sometimes they are the same, must be taken into account in the conduct of the matters. I'm required by law to seek the formal consent of older people with a disability before we commence an investigation.

You'd be familiar with this. Of course, child protection is not a will and preference jurisdiction. Child protection is a best interest, and they operate quite differently. Having said that, I can override some of their wishes. For many of the older people we are dealing with, the highest risk age is between 75 and 80 years of age. At that point there is fading capacity. Most people don't lose capacity overnight. Unless you have a catastrophic injury or illness, it's a fading capacity. We have to determine whether or not that will and preference and consent is being made in a way where the person has capacity or doesn't have that.

Just to finalise that, and I know this is of interest, we have a number of statutory requirements where we have to refer matters to other agencies. In relation to the police, I am mandatorily required to report all matters where I believe there is evidence of a crime. There is no choice, or the views of the person are not taken into account, in relation to those referrals. Similarly, if these are matters or complaints that would normally be handled by the Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission or the NDIS Quality and Safeguards Commission or the Health Care Complaints Commission then, again, without the consent of the individual, I'm required to refer those matters.

But I just want to go back. It is a will and preference jurisdiction. One of the complications—but good complications—is you've got to go and often visit the persons. And 50 per cent of our matters are now in the regions. I've put in a separate budget submission, independent of the ones we've been talking about, in relation to how we might handle it. So 50 per cent of the matters we are dealing with are in the regional areas. That poses unique resource problems in relation to visiting—both welfare visits, which the police also undertake, and actually visits which seek consent.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Thank you for that. That is most helpful. On the matter of the referral of matters to the New South Wales police, I might just refer back to, briefly, the exchange that I had with the Minister earlier today. I appreciate that you weren't here. We spoke about the matter of the Government not meeting what was a promise to appoint 56 aged crime prevention officers—a promise that was made in 2019 very publicly and very openly. As you may be aware, the present situation is that there have been 12 appointed. A promise of 56, so a deficit of 44. The essential position was that there would be one in each local area command or police area command in the metropolitan area or police district in rural and regional New South Wales.

Can you provide any information to the Committee this afternoon of dealings with the NSW Police Force about dealing with matters? This may have been through discussions you've had with them to catch up and resolve what might be existing issues or broader discussions about the—I'll use the term—"efficiency" and effectiveness of dealing with reportage of matters to the NSW Police Force and any commentary around the matter of the aged crime prevention officers and how they are going.

ROBERT FITZGERALD: In relation to the referrals, in FY21—I don't have FY22 figures just yet—251 matters were compulsorily referred to the police under the requirements that I referred to earlier, which is not a huge number. In relation to the response by the police generally, it is variable but it has been improving. One of the reasons why it has been improving is that the aged crime prevention officers and their sponsoring assistant commissioners, whom I have dealt with—we are on to our third one at the moment—have been very, very enthusiastic about the role and very enthusiastic about the work that that role facilitates.

As you know, the name is a bit of a misnomer because aged crime prevention officers deal with crimes against older people, people with disability and people experiencing homelessness. They don't necessarily

investigate the matters we refer. What they do do, in the areas that they are located, is to make sure that issues around the abuse of older people, people with disabilities and people experiencing homelessness are being properly attended to. They are part of the 17 collaboratives that the commission supports throughout New South Wales, and they are integral to being part of the training of police generally.

Beyond those commands, the responses are more variable, as you would imagine. The reason for that is that we are in the very earliest days of this abuse area as a public policy issue. I've indicated to everyone that we are where child protection was about 30 years ago and where domestic violence was about 20 years ago. I've also indicated that we won't have 20 years to get this right. The abuse of older people is increasing, the knowledge and understanding of it is growing, and the reports will rise substantially. As I indicated on Tuesday, there are societal factors that will certainly increase dramatically the level of financial abuse within our society.

The aged crime prevention officers—as you see, there are 12. We have worked very closely with them. We have worked with the assistant commissioners who are the sponsoring commissioners. It was an integral part of the suite of measures put in place by the Government to address elder abuse and the abuse of people with disability. It was an integral part of that set-up and took place at the time the commission was established. The undertakings by Premier Berejiklian and former Commissioner Fuller were unequivocal, and 12 were appointed. Since that time we have constantly written letters to various police Ministers and to the commissioners to seek understanding of what is happening in relation to the non-appointment—but, more importantly, asking them to appoint those staff.

I met recently—in fact, two weeks ago—with Commissioner Webb, the new commissioner. This is the first time that I have met with her. The formal advice I have is that she is instituting an inquiry or a review through her own officers in relation to the role of ACPOs. So the latest advice that I have is that there is a review—an internal review, or perhaps it is an external review. I'm not absolutely certain. They may be contracting to another party to examine those roles. But, let me be absolutely clear, the functions that those roles fulfil are critical. If we do not have a well-educated, responsive police force then, in fact, these issues will not be handled in the way that they need to be.

The last point I'd make is 44 police officers not appointed is an enormous resource that was meant to be allocated in this area to supplement the work of the commission. It simply must be the case that the money has been repurposed, because those 44 positions were announced as part of an increase in the intake—the overall police numbers. It wasn't just an announcement; it was actually part of an increased number of police, with specific resources to be allocated. It has to be the case that in the last two years those funds have simply been repurposed, either at the request of the police Minister or, alternatively, at the request of the police commissioner, because the funds have not gone anywhere else in relation to elder abuse or the abuse of people with disability. But all I can say at the moment is, despite numerous requests, where we're up to is that this seems to be a review of some type being conducted through the police commissioner.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: There is one question I failed to ask earlier. Mr La Posta, it's probably for you. It's an inquiry about what strategies we've currently got in place to support and increase diversity within the New South Wales public service and whether we're working on actual quotas or targets et cetera—and obviously focused on the culturally and linguistically diverse people.

JOSEPH LA POSTA: Yes, it's very important.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: It's so important.

JOSEPH LA POSTA: It's very important that our public service mirrors the communities that we're here to serve. There are a couple of initiatives that I'm really proud of at the moment. The easy thing would be for me to say that this doesn't sit within our remit because, technically, there are some elements here where we're about advocacy. But there's also some other really important initiatives that I'd love to share, and then we can probe the merit of them or otherwise. We have a mechanism called the multicultural programs and services plan, which allows us to assess the effectiveness of other government agencies around four key themes. One of them is about leadership. Under the auspices of leadership, we looked at the voice of lived experience and the capacity to be able to craft policies or decisions that are in tune with the people that they are there to represent.

What would come as no surprise is that one of the things that we are really passionate about is that sometimes we, as government, make decisions through the lens of English-proficient and digitally proficient—there are probably similar themes that Mr Fitzgerald would be extracting in a number of other cohorts across the vulnerable groups that the government works with. We make an assumption that they are like us and, therefore, if we communicate in a way that we would understand, or we craft policies in a way that we would understand, it will serve them well. The census data tells us that, as a State, we're getting more diverse. We are now up to 29.3 per cent of New South Wales that speaks a language other than English at home. In suburbs such as Auburn,

we are at 60 per cent of people who speak a language other than English. Parramatta, Cumberland and some of those other areas aren't far behind.

We know, as a State, that largely our population growth will come from migration. It's a balance. We need to strike the right balance between organic population growth and, obviously, migration. In a sense, that gives you a bit of a snapshot in terms of the constantly changing face and complexities that are associated with that as a State. The Government workforce profile at the moment estimates that about 18.5 per cent of the public service—or the respondents to the public service surveyed, I should say—spoke a language other than English as a child. It's a crude metric in terms of the census data. They don't directly correlate; one assesses households and one assesses individuals. But there is roughly about a 10 per cent gap, and it's estimated that about 13.1 per cent of respondents, as part of the public service survey data—the PMES data that comes out—are from racial, ethnic and ethno-religious minority groups.

I'm really proud and inspired by the fact that we have a public service commissioner, Kathrina Lo, who is a product of migration herself and was born in regional New South Wales. Her team is leading some really important work, in parallel with the secretaries board and others, around boosting the cultural diversity of the public service. Some of those specific initiatives include leadership programs to help accelerate the development of deputy secretaries and secretaries that are from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. It's probably best that the specifics of that are directed to the Public Service Commission on some of those things, but it's a really inspiring program that is going on.

Even within our own workforce, I'm really proud of the fact that the statistics are—and I don't have them in front of me—that about 62 per cent of our staff speak a language other than English at home. As an agency, we are role modelling and walking the walk. The challenge and the opportunity for all of us is to extrapolate that right across the public service. It is certainly front of mind for the Public Service Commission secretaries board to make sure that we work to a point where we mirror and truly can be reflective of the community that we're there to serve.

MICHAEL TIDBALL: Ms Higginson, if I may supplement those comments, the Department of Communities and Justice—in the case of DCJ, given the communities and individuals that we serve, there is a heightened need for diversity and inclusion with a workforce that really does connect with those that we are seeking to protect and support. The organisation has an inclusion strategy for four years—for 2021 to 2025—which was launched in August of last year. It has a set of specific targets which, obviously, I track closely, and Mr La Posta has spoken to some of those. Clearly, in terms of the number of First Nations staff that we have, given the challenges which were subject to Closing the Gap and other things—an area of focus for this Committee two days ago—it's obviously important. Similarly, with the number of women in senior leadership roles, all of those things are subject to targets which are regularly reported against. I can provide you with as much information as you need.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: What I might do is put in a couple of supplementary questions. It would be great to get some of that so that we understand what is actually happening. Just from your purview, how do you think we're tracking? Obviously, there was some feedback there that we are tracking quite well. I know it's relatively new. You said—

MICHAEL TIDBALL: In terms of hard statistics, I know that we have 53.7 per cent of women in senior leadership roles, and I could talk through it. I think there is a need for monitoring of the data and the analytics. I would make the comment that areas such as racism and the types of staffing and the support community that we build for our staff—certainly, also in the regions that is very important. We can never be complacent, and it's not just a matter of looking at the data. We've got to be aware of the pressure points that are building and anticipating them.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Given the entry point is—the success is having the people in the sector and the service. That's the evidence of success. Are we looking at things as straightforward as how we're appealing to people to come and work for the public sector workforce—ads and things like that about what we're putting out there?

MICHAEL TIDBALL: Absolutely. There are some areas at the moment where we are doing specific recruitment—in correctional facilities, for example. We, very sadly, as you know, have a real challenge with the Closing the Gap targets. Clearly, we want a workforce that is able to relate to and work alongside the people in those systems. Our advertising and our promotion—given the supply chain and labour market challenges which are incredibly real at the moment, we are going to really struggle to recruit staff if we are not speaking to those things. Having a work community which matches our client community is very important, but at the moment it's very challenging.

JOSEPH LA POSTA: I think it's well overdue. I think we have made some significant progress in terms of women, and I think the Indigenous focus has rightly been a focus. But the reality is that I have got the fastest growing customer base in the New South Wales public service and in the New South Wales government. If we're not thinking about strategies around the recruitment and retention of every single line of our public service, we're falling behind with what it would be to mirror our community. There are some wonderful initiatives going on. I don't for one second deny any of the great initiatives that are going on. But if I'm to do my job honestly and truthfully, I think that there's a lot more work that we need to do as a collective in this space to reflect and mirror the community that we are here to serve and make sure that on every line of our decision-making and any line of our policy crafting—any of those different things—and our engagement processes, that we have all of the different ingredients that make New South Wales the incredibly cohesive and diverse State it is.

There are some really good examples, and I'm sure the public service commissioner in supplementary questions can pick this up. Even the New South Wales grad program that they've just run, 32 per cent of that program speaks a language other than English at home. You're seeing some really exciting initiatives from the ground up that are coming through. But I think it's incumbent upon all of us to continue to prioritise what are the barriers, potentially, to getting a public service that mirrors the community. I do extensive work with colleagues across the public service about recruitment and retention strategies, marketing, language and terminology—all of those things.

MICHAEL TIDBALL: Ms Higginson, I actually could go through the data now. I have it, if you want it, or I can provide it to the Committee.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: If you're happy to provide it on notice, because I know I'm taking their time, I would be very grateful.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: I'm just conscious of the fact that it's Mr La Posta's birthday and he wants to go.

JOSEPH LA POSTA: I don't mean to derail the Committee, Mr Moselmane. I'm here for as long as you need me.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: I've got three questions. I'll be very quick.

JOSEPH LA POSTA: Mr Moselmane, just before you do, you were right before and I think we're on the same page. In terms of our Act, it is shared by the Premier and the Minister. They both collectively hold the Act, and then in terms of the allocation under the allocation of Acts, it is shared by the Minister and the Premier.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: Thank you, I appreciate it. In terms of the \$500,000 that I think yourself or the Minister indicated earlier that is allocated to, or in some sort of a contract with, Islamophobia Register Australia, can you give us a brief of what it entails, that engagement?

JOSEPH LA POSTA: Yes, I can. We discuss this regularly at budget estimates in terms of the theme of Islamophobia. The third Islamophobia report in Australia was launched on 15 March. We were invited by the author of the report, Dr Derya Iner from Charles Sturt University, to present the findings of the report to community and government partners at our COMPACT meeting alliance on 17 March 2022, and we also invited Mariam Veiszadeh, who is heavily invested in the production of the Islamophobia report and its findings, to come and talk to our leadership group as well, and that was incredibly insightful. The report analyses 247 different verified incidents that occurred from January 2018 to December 2019, so over the 24 months. Two challenges: One is the infrastructure they have around this reporting to deliver more current timings and the second is obviously the pandemic, I'm led to believe. Some would argue that the data is quite outdated in terms of January 2018 to December 2019. I still think a lot of the themes are current, and so therefore the data is congruent and relevant to our thinking. This is also the period—

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: They provide the data biannually, don't they? It seems to be—

JOSEPH LA POSTA: Yes, they do, but the data that we're talking about now that you would be referencing is from January 2018 to December 2019. We have to wait for the next report for the sort of last two years in terms of currency. I am mindful that this was also the period in which we witnessed the devastating terror attacks that claimed the lives of 51 innocent Muslims in Christchurch on 15 March 2019. The fact that the Christchurch attacker grew up in New South Wales is not lost on anyone, especially Muslim community members in New South Wales who have experienced Islamophobia.

Previous surveys by the Scanlon Foundation have pointed to concerningly high levels of anti-Islamic sentiment in Australia. Scanlon has reported that the level of negative sentiment towards those of any Muslim faith, and, by extension, to immigrants from Muslim countries, remains a factor of significance in contemporary

Australian society. The case studies provided in the *Islamophobia in Australia* report help us understand the reality of this problem by providing raw, personal and disturbing accounts of the lived experiences of Islamophobia in Australia. We are strongly committed to tackling this issue. We stand side by side with our Muslim friends, brothers and sisters and colleagues in standing up against Islamophobia. Again, I know the Minister said it before but I condemn any forms of racism and hate.

We funded the Islamophobia Register in Australia for \$500,000 under our COMPACT program, and we're partnering with them between 2021 and 2024 to make sure that we get those biannual reports now and then the next version as well. The project will also work with other victim groups to develop shared strategies to combat racism and hate, and even your own shadow Minister and others know that it's not just Islamophobia or antisemitism or Sinophobic behaviours. It's, in effect, all of the underlying drivers that allow or enable or foster or encourage people to think that any form of racism or hate is okay. There are lots of shared learnings, regardless of whether it's focused on Islamophobia or a broader conversation around racism and hate.

Whilst we are really proud of the Islamophobia project and its research, again that comes back to why we have programs like the COMPACT program and why we have, under the legislation, mechanisms such as COMPLAN to be able to bring different parts of government together to have conversations on exactly these sorts of issues—issues that threaten our social cohesion as a State, issues that undermine and disrupt our democratic freedoms that we so dearly cherish in this country. Whilst our programs aren't directly focused on a part of racism or hate, such as some of those themes, they're more focused on the drivers, and so the New South Wales COMPACT program—as the Minister said before, \$13 million of funding over four years. It has now engaged over 80 partner organisations, all committed, standing in unison to standing up and standing united against racism, hate, fear and division. The COMPACT program has also funded a national anti-racism charity called All Together Now and has delivered community awareness training on dangers of far-right extremism for frontline youth workers across New South Wales.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: Thank you, Mr La Posta. While the Minister has obviously put in, or the Government has put in, \$500,000 to support Muslims against vilification, the anti-discrimination religious vilification bill was voted down by the Government. It's not your domain, but do you know whether there is progress on that particular piece of legislation that might be coming through before the end of this year? Are you aware?

JOSEPH LA POSTA: Any bills in Parliament are probably best directed to the Attorney General and a matter for the Attorney General. What I would say around the Islamophobia report, and you touched on it before, is we don't fund the report; we fund the advocacy and victim support that sits around that to help in navigating the difficult issue. But in terms of the bill in Parliament, that's not best directed for my portfolio.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: I know. The Minister is not here to ask him, but are you aware that may be coming up between now and the end of the year?

JOSEPH LA POSTA: I don't think there is anything further I can add, Mr Moselmane. That's probably best directed to the Minister.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: Okay, but can you take it on notice?

JOSEPH LA POSTA: I can, Mr Moselmane, but again it's well outside my remit at Multicultural NSW.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: I'm trying all avenues.

JOSEPH LA POSTA: I know what you're trying to do, but it's best directed to the Attorney General.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: One final question, and it was directed to the Minister but I'll ask you. You may be able to answer this. With regards to the banning of the Hakenkreuz swastika and the carve-outs for use of the sacred swastika used by other religious groups, what education processes and initiatives is the Government putting in place to support the legislation?

JOSEPH LA POSTA: I don't like reading my notes, but on these ones you have to because they're really tricky, nuanced issues, and if I use the wrong terminology, I get reminded by the community all the time that I slipped up and said the wrong thing.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: We don't want you to do that.

JOSEPH LA POSTA: Please just bear with me. The Government has passed a bill to criminalise knowingly displaying a Nazi symbol in public without a reasonable excuse, and that was passed in August 2022 and assented by both Houses with unanimous support. I think the bill sends a strong message that the Parliament of New South Wales condemns the public display of a symbol of antisemitic hate and genocide. I do acknowledge the work of the Jewish Board of Deputies in this process and significant numbers of members of our interfaith

community, including the Hindu Council of Australia and others, that were active in the appropriate formation of this bill so that it was sensitive to other interpretations of similar symbols that have very different connotations such as things around peace and unity and other sorts of things as well—quite different from, as you said before, the iconic and devastating Nazi symbol.

The bill sends a strong message to Neo-Nazis that their brand of hate has no place in our society. The bill makes it clear that the offence does not apply to a swastika used in connection with Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism, and we know the swastika is a traditional religious symbol used in these faiths for thousands of years. I'm glad to see the Hindu and Jewish communities working side by side on the issue. As I mentioned before, I've been impressed by the level of interfaith cooperation and their collaboration across these things. It also says to me that the people of New South Wales are standing up and standing united against hateful and divisive influences. The Government's bill strengthens existing protections against vilification in New South Wales whilst also fixing some of the administrative problems from the previous bill that were creating challenges for Anti-Discrimination NSW to implement as well. I guess I admire the bipartisan support for this bill in terms of its application and its approval.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: I know it was just passed, but are there plans for educational initiatives? That's the core of my question.

JOSEPH LA POSTA: Can I take the specifics of that on notice, only because it's a cross-agency responsibility so it doesn't rest with one agency. There'll be parts that will rest with other members of the Stronger Communities cluster, the Department of Premier and Cabinet and others. So if I can take the specifics on notice and come back to you, that will probably be the best.

MICHAEL TIDBALL: If I may just say as a matter of general principle when it comes to legislative reform—speaking more as the secretary of DCJ and with the proximity to legislative reform—any new legislation, particularly those with criminal provisions, needs to be sorted by awareness and education campaigns. That is a given, provided at both institutional and broader community levels. So that is understood. It is a guiding principle with all of these statutes, as they pass, we should. We'll provide you, the Committee, with the information.

The Hon. SHAOQUETT MOSELMANE: I appreciate that. That concludes my questions.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Thank you. Through you, Chair. I do have some questions on matters to do with budgets and cost-of-living related matters, which I'll come to shortly. But before I leave the matter of elder abuse, I'd like to return to some discussion around what will be the commencement of the Voluntary Assisted Dying Act 2022 on 27 November next year and the matter of elder abuse. I commence by saying that I understand it's not within the remit of these witnesses—commenting on policy. But my questions, as you will see, go to the operation of the legislation. I'm not asking for a legal opinion either. But if you deem fit, answer now or take on notice answers about particular considerations I raise about the impacts on or relationship with elder abuse.

Can I hand up or make available to our witnesses a copy of a submission that was made to that inquiry—through the Committee's secretariat. I've got a copy here for you, Chair, and I've got a spare one for the secretariat. My colleague, Mr Moselmane, you'll have to share mine. Sorry. It's not my intention, quite obviously, to go back and revisit all the arguments both for and against the matter. A piece of legislation has passed through the Parliament, received royal assent, been proclaimed and has commenced. It is fully operationalised on 27 November next year. The time between now and then is, essentially, a period of preparing the full operationalisation of the legislation. NSW Health is the primary body in New South Wales which is going to essentially have—I'll use the word broadly—control over the operation of the practical implementation and the ongoing operation of legislation.

With the inquiry that we had into the bill, which was last year, I would just make this as a general comment. Individuals and organisations who could be probably best described as those concerned about voluntary assisted dying—otherwise known as physician-assisted suicide or euthanasia—on 10 December, that was a day for them to present their evidence before an inquiry conducted by the Legislative Council. On the previous Wednesday, those who were probably broadly defined as proponents in support of the legislation had a day with respect to the presentation of their evidence. On Friday 10 December we had representation from the Australian and New Zealand Society for Geriatric Medicine, NSW Division. This is their submission to the inquiry. I would like to just take you to, if I could, pages 1 and 2 of the submission. I have highlighted two paragraphs. I would like to read them, if I could, please. It's the bottom of page 1. The leading paragraph says:

Having reviewed the 2021 NSW VAD Bill, we recommend that the Honourable Members of the NSW Legislative Assembly and the NSW Legislative Council consider the following in their deliberations on this issue.

1. We are concerned that frail older people may be put in a position of considering VAD because they feel that they are "a burden" on others (such as family members, carers and the health care system). Such feelings are often due to underlying

depression, lack of availability of community services or family dynamics. It is possible that someone may consider an older frail older person eligible on the grounds that they have a limited life expectancy.

And then, over the page, at point 2, it's a further point they make:

2. The risk of potential coercion of vulnerable patients, by family members, carers or health providers is a significant concern. Coercion (a form of elder abuse) can be subtle and difficult to detect. Patients are often subject to subtle coercion, for example to accept admission to residential care or to control their finances.

I just reiterate that this is a submission from what is the specialist medical body for those that practise, with respect, to our seniors and the elderly. With respect to the legislation itself, at the back of the Act—and I don't expect you to have that with you, but I just want to draw it to your attention—schedule 1 is a dictionary. Schedule 1, the dictionary, has under the heading "pressure or duress":

includes abuse, coercion, intimidation, threats and undue influence.

And then, directly underneath that definition has:

Example—

elder abuse or abuse of other vulnerable persons

So, very explicitly, it is given as an example of what could be and, in fact, would be seen as pressure or duress under the legislation, which of course, as we understand, is in contradiction to and is in breach of the legislation. I direct these questions both to Mr Fitzgerald and the secretary, and this was prosecuted in our questioning of the Minister this morning. We know this, but I would just like to refer back to it again—the release late last year of the *National Elder Abuse Prevalence Study: Final Report* in late December.

The report is over 320 pages. But the executive summary contains these details—I'll just mention them because they're only short in length: one in six older Australians, approximately 15 per cent, reported experiencing abuse in the 12 months prior to being surveyed, which was the period February-May 2020. And then, over the page, it has a helpful diagram that lists in order of prevalence the examples of abuse, from highest to lowest, of this 15 per cent. It says that, with respect to the highest, "psychological abuse" comes in at 12 per cent. "multiple types of abuse", which could include, obviously, one or more of those in this list—and there is a total of six—is 4 per cent; followed by "neglect", 3 per cent; "financial abuse", 2 per cent; "physical abuse", 2 per cent; and "sexual abuse", 1 per cent. To take Mr Fitzgerald's earlier comments, I agree—and I think many people do agree—that we have this growing awareness of this matter of elder abuse, and I agree with that analysis put about how other examples of abuse have taken a long period of time to enter into and fully be understood in the public psyche and the consequences of that, and it does happen over time.

A piece of legislation will commence operationally on 27 November next year. It would be reasonable to expect that there is a likelihood leading up to that, and into the future beyond that date of commencement of operation, that individuals personally affected, or family members or others aware of instances of people—particularly, in my view, seniors towards the end of life—would be nudged or pressured towards the consideration of voluntary assisted dying to end their life. That, of course, will be criminal. As I think we would understand, it will be very hard to prove that that has happened. But nevertheless—and I'm sorry for the long introduction to this, but I think it's important to make this point—there is already evidence in the State of Victoria that this is actually happening and that elderly people in the State of Victoria have been nudged or pressured to end their life through the voluntary assisted dying scheme in that State.

My question is—and if it needs to be taken on notice, take it on notice—with respect to the commission and more broadly the remit of Seniors within the New South Wales Government, what ought our minds be turned to as we start to think about how we will manage those situations of reportage of concerns about individuals being at the light end nudged or at the other end basically pressured towards proceeding with VAD? There could be financial matters or a whole range of things. I might leave my comments there.

ROBERT FITZGERALD: I might just comment, and then the secretary. First I just need to be clear: The commission has never expressed a view in relation to voluntary assisted dying and has no view in relation to that particular public policy. However, it does have a view in relation to safeguarding. The first thing I would just simply say is the observation on page 1 that you've highlighted, number 1, and the observation on page 2 you've highlighted, number 2, are both legitimate concerns to have been raised as part of the debate in relation to VAD. It's self-evident that vulnerable older Australians are subject to abuse, including psychological abuse. It is likely that vulnerable people could be placed under pressure. In New South Wales we have no evidence of that in relation to VAD, because we don't have VAD. Your observations in Victoria I note, but I don't have any independent evidence of that.

The third point I'd make is psychological abuse does include coercive conduct of all forms. If we received a matter via the helpline or the commission generally that there was a view that an older person was being subject

to psychological abuse, coercive conduct or any of the matters you've now raised, it would be within the jurisdiction of the commission, because all forms of abuse in relation to older people over the age of 65 or Indigenous people over the age of 50 are in our jurisdiction. The point that I would make is all forms of abuse are within our jurisdiction.

The fourth point I'd like to take on notice in terms of what matters we should proactively consider in relation to these things, but a couple of things I would say. The first thing is the scheme only applies to people that have capacity. The issue of capacity is complex. DCJ has a guide that is in relation to helping practitioners, legal practitioners and others, in relation to capacity, and we ourselves are always dealing with that issue. So the first point I make is this scheme can only apply if you have capacity and cannot be applied to somebody that does not, so that's the first test.

The second thing is we know that older people, people with disabilities, often require supported decision-making arrangements—that is, whilst they may have capacity, they often need people to assist them in the way in which those decisions are made. The commission is on record as believing New South Wales should introduce a supported decision-making regime in a form. Whether it's the form recommended by the NSW Law Reform Commission in 2018 or a different form, that's for another day. We do believe that supported decision-making should be available for people that are vulnerable who have not yet lost capacity.

The third thing is critically important. The education campaigns—the support that is given to older persons' advocate groups and perhaps other new advocacy areas that we haven't yet developed—would be important so that people can in fact obtain independent, objective, well-informed information to assist them in the decisions that they make. But for more details, I just need to give some consideration to that. But I want to assure you that if there is evidence of a person being at risk of psychological abuse—and psychological abuse is often related to financial abuse, as you would imagine—then it would be within our jurisdiction.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Thank you for that. Once again, I appreciate the parameters around the way in which the answers need to be provided, and I'm grateful for that. It is a complex area. As I say, I'm not rehearsing all the arguments we covered last year with the debate in the Parliament. It is now in legislation, but we are now having to look forward to the commencement of it. My particular concern, amongst others, is around the potential vulnerability of the elderly and, indeed, the disabled as well.

MICHAEL TIDBALL: Mr Donnelly, would you like me to comment briefly?

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Please, secretary, yes.

MICHAEL TIDBALL: I appreciate the importance and the sensitivity of the matters which you have highlighted. In a strict sense—and this is not my answer, but in a strict sense—I gather that there is a working group being chaired by Kerry Chant in NSW Health and that that has a number of work streams. I'm not briefed on the detail of that. But what I might suggest, if it is of assistance to the Committee, is that Mr Fitzgerald and I will confer. One of the things that I take quite seriously in my role is that of being a bridge between different parts of Government, stressing that it is in a strict sense a matter being run, I believe, by the department of Health. But I'm certainly happy to facilitate, and perhaps we jointly can come back to the Committee.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: I'd be grateful for that, and of course there are other arms and agencies. The NSW Police Force, for example, have been dealing with matters that potentially have criminality associated with them. That will need to be considered, along with other areas. Perhaps I'll leave my questions in regard to that particular area there, but thank you for being able to address them in the way that you have. I'm just conscious of the time. It's 3.30 p.m. and I've still got some more questions. Should I keep pressing on, or is there a break?

The CHAIR: We have a break scheduled at 3.30 p.m., so we might stop now and then come back in 15 minutes.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: I'm not looking to drag this on interminably, but there are a few more questions.

JOSEPH LA POSTA: Are any directed to the Multiculturalism portfolio?

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: No, none, and may you have happy birthday with your family tonight.

JOSEPH LA POSTA: Thank you.

The CHAIR: There being no further questions, Mr La Posta, you're released. I don't know whether you took any questions on notice?

JOSEPH LA POSTA: Thank you to the panel. Yes, we did, and we will respond in the appropriate time.

The CHAIR: You have 21 days, then, to respond. Thank you.

(Mr Joseph La Posta withdrew.)

(Short adjournment)

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Thank you all for coming back after the break. I was wondering if I could now move on to some questions particularly around the issue of budget. I am talking more broadly about the parameters around determining what the budget is for seniors in New South Wales with some specificity. I note from looking at *Budget Paper No. 5* on page 6, under Stronger Communities, it has an item down the bottom "Cluster grants and other adjustments", just over \$9 million. From looking at media releases from the Minister for Seniors, Mark Coure, particularly the one on 21 June, it notes, quoting directly from the media release:

Minister for Seniors Mark Coure said \$8 million in the Budget had been secured so events, support programs and cost-of-living measures could continue.

It specifically says "events, support programs and cost-of-living measures could continue". We've got that amount of \$8 million and we've got the operation of the commission, which we had some discussion on earlier this afternoon. We can see those two very clearly. But in addition to those two clear items that we can identify and see, what else makes up the totality of the budget for seniors in New South Wales? Can I just say this is not an ambush. If you need more detail that's not before you, that's fine. You can take some of these on notice so you can move through them. I'm not looking to say, "I gotcha". Some of these might be complex to explain. It is up to you.

MICHAEL TIDBALL: I will do my best, and I'll tell you all I know. Where I don't, I'll take it on notice. In front of me I have *Budget Paper No. 2*, which tends to be the reference point which I use. The figure I have—just dealing with, I think, three parts, if I may. One is the first figure which you refer to as \$9 million in *Budget Paper No. 5* in the reference to which you have averted. In the figures I have—then you refer to \$8 million in the press release. What I have in front of me is 8.7. Just quickly to itemise that, as it's I think the first question, would you like me to itemise what I understand to be the allocation for this current year and the \$8.7 million or break it down?

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Yes, please.

MICHAEL TIDBALL: A pleasure. NSW Seniors Festival—and correct me—NSW Seniors Festival, 1.8; Tech Savvy Seniors, 0.5 million; Seniors Card, 1.1; advocacy peak, 1.4; reducing social isolation for seniors, 0.6 million; legal aid diaries, 230,000; the MACA, Ministerial Advisory Council on Ageing, 0.95 million; national Elder Abuse Strategy, 0.03 million; the Ageing & Disability Commission, 0.75 million, DCJ projects, Art of Ageing, and there are a number of these Art of Ageing, 0.02 million; 0.020 million for Global Access Partners on productive ageing, 0.050 million on the MACA media awards; the seniors gala concerts, 1.25 million; the Ageing Strategy, 0.2 million; and the remainder are employee costs. What I will do is I'll set that out. I'll reduce that to writing for you.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: That would be good, thank you for that. If we look at those and please elucidate—

MICHAEL TIDBALL: There's a very important element to this, Mr Donnelly. Those figures do not include staff costs.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: That's an important clarification, so thank you. If we've got the totality of those items, we've got, obviously, the recurring costs of the commission. We can establish, essentially, looking at last year's financial report, at least what that figure approximately is and what it may be for the next financial year. With respect to staff costs, when you're providing your response, could you please itemise that as a total number?

MICHAEL TIDBALL: What I would do, if I may, because I think this would be more indicative to the Committee is that, in my view, should have three costs, notwithstanding the commission, which are separate but can be set out: core staffing costs for the core function, i.e., the work that you and your team do; secondly, the Seniors Card team; and a third aspect, which is important, the communications staff.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Yes. If you could provide that, I'd be grateful. I'm always ambitious with my questioning, so could I invite you to also replicate those figures for—you'll do it for the last financial year, the 2021-22?

MICHAEL TIDBALL: Yes.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Could you please do 2020-21 and 2019-20—the last three financial years?

MICHAEL TIDBALL: Just to be clear, you want the current year, last year and the year before.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: The current year is budgeted, isn't it? We're in the current year now. I'm talking about the immediate past financial year and the two before that.

MICHAEL TIDBALL: Got it.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: I'd be grateful for that. Can I move on now with some specific questions—once again, if it's required to be taken on notice, so be it—around the matter of rebates and the promotion of the availability of rebate benefits to seniors in this State. Quite self-evidently, I think, it's fair to say that, if rebates are available, they're generally a good thing. I suppose most people would take the view that the larger the rebate, the better, in terms of what might be available to them. With respect to rebates, with respect to seniors, there are various rebates which are actively, on an ongoing basis, promoted by the Government through the Minister and others. You may not have it with you, but are you able to, if you don't have it with you, provide a list of what are the rebates promoted by the Minister for Seniors out to the seniors of this State so they can take advantage of them, the list of possible rebates? If you've got them now, that's fine.

MICHAEL TIDBALL: I'll refer to my colleague, if I may.

MELINDA NORTON: There's a number available. These are delivered in conjunction with Service NSW. I'll list a couple of them for you, but there are 53 rebates available, and self-funded retirees are eligible for 42 of those. They include things such as free driving tests for pensioners, free mobility parking scheme for pensioners, free writing skills for pensioners, pensioner concessions on vehicle registrations, pensioner free New South Wales driving licence renewal, pensioner water rebate, seniors energy rebate, the pensioner concession Opal card, pensioner travel vouchers, the regional seniors travel card—

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Without being rude and cutting you off—if there's that many, which is good, would you mind having them listed on notice so we could get that completely.

MELINDA NORTON: Yes. The other one I might just mention is the Seniors Card. That's a product delivered through DCJ. That's got over 1.9 million members, with over 6½ thousand discounts. That has significant take-up with seniors in New South Wales. They are able to access a whole range of discounts through a range of partners.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: That was going to be my next question. You probably are aware that there has been some publicity earlier this year and, in fact, before, in previous years, about what is reported as large numbers of seniors—many tens of thousands of seniors—missing out on accessing rebates for one reason or another. The general sentiment around this, why they are missing out, is that they just don't know about the availability of these rebates. There was some publicity back in June this year—I'm just reading from the material that came out at the time reporting on it. In this particular example, up to 70,000 seniors have missed out on a major New South Wales Government cost-of-living help scheme, some saying they had no idea the saving was on offer. This is the \$200 Seniors Energy Rebate.

What work has been done—if it has not been done, I would like to know why—to systematically analyse and understand the knowledge that our seniors have in this State, first of all, about the rebates by the State Government, what they are and how they can take advantage of them? What do we know objectively about the knowledge of our seniors with respect to the rebate program?

MELINDA NORTON: I think we will probably provide some additional information on notice, having had some discussions with Service NSW on that. But we do work with Service NSW, and I know they're in the process of developing some targeted, customised communications for seniors around the types of rebates. Our Seniors Card database—which, as I mentioned, is quite significant—we use that as a communication tool to share information with that group about both the available website information in terms of the savings finders but also the appointments that they can go to at Service NSW to find out what rebates they're eligible for themselves, and also through our peak organisations. We fund four peaks in this space, and we work with them as well as part of their processes to communicate with people that they connect with to include things like rebates.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Given what I said earlier today that there are more seniors in New South Wales than there are South Australians living in South Australia, what percentage of our seniors are signed up to the card? Do we have some knowledge on that?

MICHAEL TIDBALL: Can I just say, I hear where your question is coming from. We will need to take that on notice. I have no knowledge of it, but I understand it's not the actual who we are reaching there. Your question is about the analytics and the basis upon which we, based on that knowledge, promote and target and what the yield is on that in terms of that approach. Have I understood?

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Yes, yes. I mean, that's essentially what I'm getting at. But we only know what we know, so to speak. If it's not being looked at and analysed carefully, we may have—what may be being done, it may be considered a great benefit to those who are currently receiving it, but if that is just a small subset of this huge population—

MICHAEL TIDBALL: I will need to take on notice, but I think I understand what you're asking.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: That's what I'm getting at—a breakdown of that so we can see, with greater specificity, what is the actual sub-population of seniors out of the total population of seniors who have an awareness, understanding and are taking advantage of these rebates, as best the information is that is at your disposal. Particularly in the area of energy, be it electricity and gas, are there any particular comments that you would like to make about work being done to see how there can be an enhancement or a refinement of rebates associated with both those two key cost drivers for seniors, given that they are on fixed incomes?

MICHAEL TIDBALL: The straight answer is I really do not know, and I will revert—

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Take it on notice.

MICHAEL TIDBALL: Thanks.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: If you take that on notice, that would be good. Can I move on to a separate but related issue of council rates? I've got a cheat sheet here. If you don't mind, I will refer to my cheat sheet now:

Under the *Local Government Act 1993*, eligible pensioners are provided concessions on their ordinary rates and domestic waste management services charge. The cost of providing these concessions is shared between the State Government (55%) and local councils (45%).

We've got what the concessional amounts are. I won't read them all but the first one is:

- \$250.00 on ordinary rates and charges for domestic waste management services;
- \$87.50 off their annual water rates and charges (where service is provided by council);
- \$87.50 off their annual sewerage rates and charges (where service is provided by council).

And then some eligibility criteria being met—these, of course, are fixed dollar rebate figures that've been made available, or perhaps better described as concessional discount amounts. But, of course, rates tend to increase on a percentage basis. We have a situation that, in real terms over a period of time, we're actually having quite an erosion down of the value of what these would be vis-a-vis what are the rates that seniors are paying.

The Minister's not here with us this afternoon. I won't read this fully onto the record but it's a piece of correspondence that he's received and I'm happy to pass it up to the secretary. It's from a Ms Cynthia Coppock, who wrote to the Minister laying out with some detail what I've just been discussing and describing. Herself and people in like position are going backwards with the fact that these rebates are fixed amounts. Perhaps I'll pass that up through the secretariat. It's just a copy of the letter. It may help you reference—

MICHAEL TIDBALL: And I will. I understand the issue. It's the erosion of dollar value relative to if it was proportionate. I will take that on notice.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Yes. I have to say, with individuals who are on fixed incomes and modest ones at that—self-funded retirees in that classification as well—every dollar counts. I know that's trite to say but it's definitely the case. Can I move on to—I'm moving through these quickly and I appreciate this—the matter of cost of housing and accommodation, which is obviously a pressing issue not just for seniors but all people in the State, particularly in the larger metropolitan areas. I would like to know, if you could provide the answer now or on notice, what the department is doing, or has done and is doing and continues to plan to do, to provide advice, assistance, information to seniors about how to navigate as best as they can dealing with the rising costs associated with housing and accommodation.

I say that because there are other organisations very active in this area. For example, the Tenants' Union of NSW is very focused on trying to provide information about how best one can go about dealing with this very significant cost pressure. Given the number of seniors who are caught by this, I'd be very keen to find out what has been done, is being done and plans to be done.

MICHAEL TIDBALL: I understand and I will take that on notice as well, if I may.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: With respect to the seniors regional travel card, I'm wondering, if you have the information available to us, are you able to give us some clarity about whether it has moved beyond a trial stage—which it certainly was for a period of time—and is now essentially, if it is, a settled matter in terms of what it's going to provide for? This is specifically the seniors regional travel card and matters pertaining to that.

MICHAEL TIDBALL: I think we can provide you with some information. If we don't get to the pointy end, we'll be very happy to take it on notice.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: That's fine, but whatever you might have there—

MICHAEL TIDBALL: In terms of take-up, I should start there. So it provides for \$250 to spend on fuel, taxis and NSW TrainLink and coach services. Just in terms of take-up, more than 337,500 seniors successfully applied for the card in 2020, and 353,954 cards were issued in 2021. As at 17 June of this year, 326,688 cards have been issued.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Is this in the context that we're still trialling this or it has moved beyond that and this is now talking about what is the—

MICHAEL TIDBALL: Mr Donnelly, I'm advised it's still a trial. I will need to confirm that.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Thank you. We understand it's in its third year of trial. We thought that the trial was going to be in the first instance over a two-year period.

MICHAEL TIDBALL: Just on that point, there's \$246 million allocated to extend the regional seniors travel card for an additional two years, those years being 2022 and 2023.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: But as part of what is an extension of a trial?

MICHAEL TIDBALL: Correct, on the advice I have. I will confirm that.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: On notice, if you'd be good enough to consider explaining why we haven't moved beyond that point of the trial being settled to a firm position and we do not have an ongoing seniors' regional travel card arrangement. Because within the trial itself, there are some, dare I say, anomaly situations of people living in certain areas and some getting it and some not. I won't take the Committee's time up by reading through this. I'll put this in my questions on notice, explaining what some of the anomalies are and that might help assist you in answering the questions in that regard.

MICHAEL TIDBALL: It may also be helpful to the Committee if I set out the eligibility criteria.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Yes, that would be good. That additional information would be helpful. You would be aware, Mr Secretary, about a draft piece—sorry, I shouldn't be presumptuous. I put this to you: There is a draft Government bill before Parliament, the Crimes Legislation Amendment (Coercive Control) Bill 2022.

MICHAEL TIDBALL: Yes.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: It has not passed the Parliament yet. It's under active consideration. You probably have some general familiarity with that. The question is—and if it has got to be taken on notice, so be it—have you had any question and answer sessions with the Minister examining the draft bill and giving consideration about whether it should be extended beyond its current boundaries, if we could use that phrase, to deal with relationships that go beyond what are provided for in the bill? That is probably the easiest way I can put it.

MICHAEL TIDBALL: Thank you. The carriage of the bill lies with the Attorney General, with whom I have definitely had discussions. The Attorney was asked questions in his estimates hearing specifically on the bill. From memory, on that specific question—I think if you refer to the transcript, it will assist you.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: It may well have been the same question I just asked you, for all I know. I will check the Hansard transcript from the Attorney's—

MICHAEL TIDBALL: And if it is insufficient, come back to me.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: I wasn't aware of that, and I wasn't asking the question seeking to see if there was going to be a different answer. I just wasn't aware that it was covered in that budget estimates hearing. But can I ask you the question again? Have you had any discussion with Minister Coure about this particular matter? The piece of legislation has potential relevance, or otherwise, for—

MICHAEL TIDBALL: I have not. But can I say that the matter has been considered within the consultation and the processes that we have gone through are comprehensive. There has been very rigorous consideration of a number of issues, including that to which you advert. But I have not had discussions specifically with the Minister, but it is something that, as I say, is in a responsibility sense not a matter for him.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: May I ask you, Commissioner, is this a matter that you have given some consideration to and/or perhaps, if it is the case, made some representation or submission on the draft bill?

ROBERT FITZGERALD: Yes, we have. As indicated to you previously, psychological abuse often has elements of coercive conduct. In relation to the potential offending or the potential abuse, more than 60 per cent of abuse of older people is by family members—predominantly adult children. About 12 per cent is by spousal partners. The 12 per cent, in relation to older people abuse, would fit within that choice of conduct definition being proposed by the Attorney. In relation to the other matters, we've made two submissions. That the definition should be expanded beyond its current terms of intimate relationships to what we believe is a broader division called domestic relationships. If that were to take place, that would pick up the majority of the inter-family abuse or the abuse by carers that live with or have lived with the older person.

Our view is that a modest extension of the definition would, in fact, pick up a substantial portion of the group that are alleged to have been offending against older people. I might say the same in relation to people with disability, just to complete the picture. The position is slightly different. The major people accused of abusing adults with disability are parents, particularly in relation to people with disabilities between the age of 18 and 25 years. Again, the current definition—there is some question as to whether it would pick those people up or not. Our view is a broader definition would certainly pick those particular situations up.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Thank you, Commissioner. Ms Norton, can I ask you a question specifically? With respect to your role as director of Disability Reform, Royal Commission and Seniors, Department of Communities and Justice, can you provide to the Committee an overview of the remit of your work and responsibilities?

MELINDA NORTON: Certainly. It is quite a descriptive title. Disability Reform—that part of my role involves working largely around the obligations of the Disability Inclusion Act. That includes things such as the NSW Disability Inclusion Plan, disability inclusion action plans for each of the government agencies and local councils, Disability Council, and few other things related primarily to the Disability Inclusion Act. Disability Royal Commission work—I support the work of DCJ in supporting the role of the royal commission. I have a small team to do that, but I also have a cross-government role working with other agencies to also support the work of the commission in providing information, whether that's at a hearing or outside the hearing to support their work. And then, obviously, the Seniors role we've spoken about today—a small team of people that focus on things such as the Ageing Strategy, the various reforms or bits of work we spoke about as part of the budget, so supporting the implementation of various programs, grants programs and so on.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: To take just one element of what you have just said, particularly towards the end of your contribution there about the Ageing Strategy, which is the one that we referred to earlier today—the 2021-2031 document. What would you be doing in regards to that work associated with that Ageing Strategy? I mean, it's there. It's in the public domain. What are you doing? I'm not being disrespectful with this question, but what is the ongoing work that you contribute your time to in dealing with the Ageing Strategy?

MELINDA NORTON: Absolutely. I think one of the important elements of the strategy is the action plan that accompanies it. As you mentioned this morning, the strategy is a 10-year strategy, but part of that is commitment every two years to have action plans. That provides the New South Wales Government with an opportunity to provide information around current activity to support seniors. At this time, we're drawing towards the end of that first two-year action plan. We're talking to our other Government partners—the people that contribute to that plan, the 90 actions in that plan—to report to us on what activities happened there and what progress they've made. That'll be a publicly available report early next year.

Concurrently, we're working on the next action plan, the 2023-24 action plan, again working with those agencies and others to identify what work they will be doing over that period that we would include in that publicly available action plan. That forms part of our work. One of the actions we've got in the plan, and I think this Committee spoke about it at the last estimates hearing, was about—how do we know the plan makes a difference? We're also working with all of those agencies to describe the evaluation framework and the process for that evaluation as part of the 10-year strategy. That's some of what the work involves.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Just a question going back to expenses and cost of living—the matter of the cost of insurance for our seniors, particularly in recent times with the natural disasters and the greater public discourse and discussion around insurance costs, particularly with respect to insurances with respect to residents in certain parts of the State. It has opened up quite a broad discussion about insurance costs. We obviously all know and understand the consequences of not having insurance on property and content and, if a disaster occurs, what we then face. But with respect once again to our seniors who are on fixed incomes and are often quite tight financially, is there any work being done looking at this issue of insurance costs and what are possible matters that could be looked at in terms of trying to advocate on behalf of seniors or help seniors? It's a very broad question, but it is one exercising the mind, particularly of some of the peak groups representing seniors—the cost of insurance.

MICHAEL TIDBALL: Not to my knowledge.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Okay. Well, I have a few more questions, but I think I might place them on notice for everyone. I think people have been generous with their time and patience. Mr Chair, I'll place my other questions on notice.

The CHAIR: Thanks very much. Government questions?

The Hon. PETER POULOS: Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon, secretary, commissioner and director. Thank you very much for your time today and your input. Before we conclude, did any of you have any additional information or updates you wish to share with the Committee?

MICHAEL TIDBALL: No.

The CHAIR: I note that you've taken a number of questions on notice. You have 21 days to reply. Thank you very much for coming today.

The Hon. GREG DONNELLY: Thank you very much for the important work you do on behalf of our seniors and disabled.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

The Committee proceeded to deliberate.