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THE PARLIAMENTARY STANDING COMMITTEE OF PUBLIC ACCOUNTS MET IN COMMITTEE ROOM 2, PARLIAMENT HOUSE, HOBART, ON FRIDAY, 5 MARCH 2021.

INQUIRY INTO THE TASMANIAN GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSE TO COVID-19

Hon ELISE ARCHER, MP, ATTORNEY-GENERAL.

Ms GINNA WEBSTER, Ms PENNY IKEDIFE and Mr JIM CONNOLLY WERE CALLED, MADE THE STATUTORY DECLARATION AND WERE EXAMINED.

CHAIR (Mr Dean) - I advise that Hon Ruth Forrest is an apology for today. There is sickness in her family, so Ruth won't be here today, which is unfortunate.

We have all appeared before these committees before. I think you would understand the positions very well about parliamentary privilege applying in here, but you need to be a little careful once you leave this committee.

This is a public hearing. It is being recorded. We are on air, and it will be committed to *Hansard* in due course in writing, and will be available to anybody who wishes to have that information. That is probably all I need to say in that regard.

Attorney-General, I will leave it open to you, if you want, to make any opening comment to this matter we are dealing with.

The terms of reference are clear and you would have seen copies of it. In this instance, we are looking at how the court system managed through the COVID-19 period, its recovery, and costs, where it has all gone and what has happened in relation to it.

I will leave it open if you wanted to make some introductory comments.

Ms ARCHER - Thank you, Chair, and I would. I am very proud of the efforts that my department has made in relation to COVID-19, in keeping not only our staff safe, but also those visiting premises. Of course, this part of the hearing is dealing with the Supreme Court and Magistrates Court.

They are independent in themselves, because of the separation of powers; hence I have the registrar and the administrator of those courts respectively with me, and they will be able to provide evidence in that regard.

The department certainly provided full support to the courts, and continues to do so. We provided full support to the courts by way of not only budget measures, but the sort of assistance that is required. There's no greater example of assistance in terms of personnel advice and other support during the COVID-19 period.

Obviously, we needed to ensure that our facilities could still continue as much as possible. Legal services were considered to be essential services as part of our COVID-19 response, and so we worked with the courts, with the Chief Justice and Chief Magistrate, in relation to what closures may have been required.

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With the Supreme Court, for example, there was an immediate closure, and we had to stop jury trials. We can go into that a bit further.

There were different measures taken in relation to the Magistrates Court, not having a jury system, but of course operating a very busy court system, and a number of courts running alongside each other each and every day. There were quite significant measures taken in relation to IT and technology. So much so that in the most recent budget, we boosted the amount of money that is provided to each of the courts to upgrade those facilities.

CHAIR - I will lead off with questions. What impacting issues and significant changes did we see to the Supreme Court and to the Court of Petty Sessions as a result of COVID-19?

Ms ARCHER - I might kick off with our administrator, Penny Ikedife, in relation to the Magistrates Court. She is next to me, and then we might move to the Supreme Court.

Ms IKEDIFE - Thank you. The Magistrates Court's main concern in response to COVID-19 was to ensure the safety of members of the public who were required to attend court in some form or other, and also to maintain the court process itself, so that matters were still coming before the court and being dealt with. What we were required to do in the first instance was ensure that any density and social distancing requirements were met. That meant we had to turn to IT to help us maintain a caseload that enabled matters to flow through the court system. We had a very heavy reliance on Zoom, and also telephone link-ups, for court matters to be dealt with in that way.

CHAIR - In relation to Zoom, how did that proceed? Were there any issues or hiccups? Did it work well? Was it a system that met all of your requirements going into that process?

Ms IKEDIFE - It worked very well. We had a lot of support from the Justice Connect team to help us set up the system, because it wasn't something we had used before. They also provided advice as to the security of the Zoom application.

Ms ARCHER - That's our department personnel Penny is referring to.

Ms IKEDIFE - It was able to be used with most of our existing infrastructure in the form of cameras, laptops or computers. It worked very well.

Mr WILLIE - How did it work in practical terms? Could you talk us through that a bit? Defendants were appearing on Zoom?

Ms IKEDIFE - One of the reasons we choose Zoom as an application was because it was so accessible. So many members of the public were generally familiar with it and could download it for free, or just click on a link they were sent, and access the court that way. We had people appearing from anywhere. They were sent a link and they would connect into the court. One of the benefits of Zoom was that you could sit in a waiting room until the court clerk admitted the person to their part of the session.

Mr WILLIE - And if they didn't have access to technology? There's a digital divide in Tasmania, and I'd imagine a lot of people appearing before the Magistrates Court might not have access to technology.

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Ms IKEDIFE - Most people had either Zoom access or telephone, so we were able to phone them from the court and connect by that means, so they could appear before the court. Those who had no other option were able to come into the building, except for a period of three weeks in Burnie when the restrictions in the north-west applied.

Mr O'BYRNE - Most of the public sector use Microsoft Teams as a software preference, so in terms of the procurement and how that decision was made, is there a central Government decision around which applications are used? I think every engagement I've had with the public sector has not been Zoom, it's been Microsoft Teams. Could you talk through that?

Ms ARCHER - It was entirely a court decision. We didn't interfere in that process. It was entirely up to the courts as to how they wished to operate and what best suited their needs.

I'm assuming that had Zoom not worked very well, they would have attempted to transfer to another system. It was very much a case of trial and error. Everybody will recall what COVID-19 was like in those early days. It was very much an urgency/emergency situation, and that's how the court decided it - on what best suited the users of the court.

Mr O'BYRNE - I'm not disputing that. Was Microsoft Teams trialled as a technology, and who made the decision to move to Zoom?

Ms IKEDIFE - We had IT advice on Zoom. We had to move very quickly, and that was accessible and easy. We knew it would be accessible to the majority of people who were going to be appearing. At that time, I recall we may have been in the process of moving from Skype to Business to Teams?

Ms ARCHER - I think you were, because we met and I remember you saying that.

Ms IKEDIFE - We weren't quite sure what Teams was going to look like at the time, and I think, back in March 2020, Teams didn't have the additional capacity that Zoom had.

Mr O'BYRNE - The waiting room.

Ms IKEDIFE - The waiting room, which is something that we use a lot.

Mr O'BYRNE - In terms of the time lines, things moved very quickly from late March onwards. What was the transition point for having Zoom or technology as the preference of representation for the cases?

Ms IKEDIFE - It was very quick. I think a practice direction was issued by the Chief Magistrate on 24 March 2020 in relation to civil matters. It took us a little longer to finalise the practice direction in relation to criminal matters, but that was 30 March 2020.

Mr O'BYRNE - In terms of the decision - because obviously the courts were still operating at a much reduced level because of distancing, et cetera - what was the line between saying this is a matter for Zoom, or this is a matter for face-to-face? Was that a magistrate decision or was that an administrative decision?

Ms IKEDIFE - It was always subject to the determination of the magistrate. The practice directions that the Chief Magistrate issued said the preference is that we go electronic. That is

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the first port of call. However, if for any reason you are unable to, or for whatever reason don't wish to, then there was a process by which people could contact the court and say, 'I would like to come in'; and that occurred as well.

Mr O'BYRNE - Was there a blanket offer to everyone with matters before the Magistrates Court or the courts that you administer, that we can do this by Zoom? Or was there a line between the type of case, or the type of matter, before the courts?

Ms IKEDIFE - Some matters were dealt with in person. Some matters - such as where people were in custody - if there was a hearing - although we didn't proceed with hearings except when they were very high priority - they would be in person, so a person had the benefit of being in the courtroom. Similarly, sentencing matters tended to be in person; although the north-west did an increased number of sentencing matters over the video link, direct to the prison in many cases.

Mr O'BYRNE - Did the prison use Zoom?

Ms IKEDIFE - Yes.

Mr O'BYRNE - Right, okay. In terms of the volume of matters dealt with by Zoom now that we're going back to some level of lighter restrictions, the numbers of matters appearing by technology - are they continuing to increase or are they decreasing? What's the obviously sort of intense moment, because you have no choice with social distancing, and matters need to be dealt with? We're now moving back to a more semi-normal environment. What do the numbers look like, in terms of face-to-face and Zoom now?

Ms IKEDIFE - There's been a vast increase in face-to-face numbers, so a significant fit back to where we previously were.

The Chief Magistrate issued a further practice direction in around June, I think, saying from now on the preference is that we go face-to-face, but electronic is always an option. It reversed the onus really, so you applied to the court to appear by audiovisual link or telephone, as opposed to that being the first assumption.

Mr O'BYRNE - Can you provide the committee the numbers - if it's a month by month - about the kind of appearances? I am trying to understand the adaption here.

Ms ARCHER - Do we have those figures to hand.

Ms IKEDIFE - No, we don't.

Mr O'BYRNE - If you can present that to the committee later, if that's okay.

Ms IKEDIFE - It's difficult to keep figures, because of the number of appearances on each matter. We would have to go into each individual matter and each appearance to determine whether it was a video or an in-person appearance. I don't believe our system, as it exists now, would let us do that easily. We could give an indication of an estimate.

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Mr O'BYRNE - The system you have at the minute doesn't enable you to track the number of appearances around the matters before the courts?

Ms IKEDIFE - We can track the number of appearances certainly but not the nature of those appearances.

Mr O'BYRNE - Whether they are face to face or whether they're -

Ms ARCHER - That's precisely the reason we have Astria coming online. We refer to it as Justice Connect, but the formal name now, which we have given it, is Astria - which I referred to at Budget Estimates - and have been for a number of years. It is the technological side of things as to how we are going to interconnect between Justice and Police and courts, so this type of information will be readily kept. It will be a significant database with basically the capability to keep all of these risk data.

Mr O'BYRNE - Having the data on those sorts of appearances - there may be an efficiency. Obviously there's lots of challenges with the demand before the courts, but understanding what's a more efficient and easier way to deal with the matters.

Ms ARCHER - You may turn your mind back to incorrect releases and all sorts of things that occur because of human error. This process has been embarked upon - and a significant amount of money spent by Government - to ensure that we reduce, if not eradicate, those sorts of errors. In the process, it gives us the capability to keep all of this data and share it between the courts, Justice and the prison system.

Mr WILLIE - Minister, what are the drawbacks for using technology? We've just heard that it was used during the lockdown period and shortly thereafter, and now we're going back to face-to-face. There must be a preference to go face-to-face and what are those reasons?

Ms ARCHER - I don't think you can ever replace in-person appearances and the value of that; nor indeed from my perspective, having practised and acted for people, the value of the court - or in the case of the Supreme Court, the ability for a jury to assess a defendant's demeanour as well, how they present. We all know that it can be quite a different experience over Zoom or some other technology, and you don't get that same in-person experience.

I don't know if Penny wants to add to that from her discussions with the Magistrates as to how they found it; but certainly, from the perspective of someone who's worked in the court system it's a rather impersonal way of dealing with things. Great to have as a back-up.

We are dealing with the courts here, not the prison system - we have that coming up - the beauty of keeping it going to our prison is to create efficiencies. If someone's not necessarily appearing for a hearing, but it's just an adjournment matter, then not having to transport them into the court for that purpose and being able to deal with that online, we're trying to keep those appearances going. For obvious reasons, that creates efficiencies in terms of cost and time.

I want to see if Penny had anything to add in relation to the Magistrates' experience.

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Ms IKEDIFE - I think it's important to stress that some types of appearances are better suited to in-person appearances, whereas the more administrative or shorter appearances might be better suited to video link which we use extensively, particularly with the prison.

From the Magistrate's Court's perspective, a drawback of using either audiovisual or telephone links for multiple small matters is the time that it takes the court clerk to make the connection. You might have six or seven parties on the phone or on a video link, and it's much slower so it reduces the speed. You might have a list of 150 matters and it's slower to connect to all those people.

CHAIR - The persons on summons or bail, did they have any option? If they were told that their matter was going to be dealt via Zoom or what have you, were they able to say, 'Well, no, my preference is to present myself in person'. Did they have a say in this at all?

Ms IKEDIFE - Yes, they have the option of contacting the court and advising them.

CHAIR - Whereabouts did these people appear on Zoom - somebody on summons or somebody on bail?

Ms IKEDIFE - We had one in the bathroom and one on a tractor.

CHAIR - Is that right? They could appear wherever they might be on the day?

Ms IKEDIFE - Yes.

Ms ARCHER - We were just talking about how some matters are best kept for personal appearances. You do have the unfortunate situation where some people don't appear in court and warrants have to be issued. That's far more difficult when it's a Zoom appearance.

CHAIR - The other position is that where there is a breakdown. How easy was it to show, say, if a defendant on summons or bail failed to get to their Zoom meeting, how could it be proven that they didn't try? Were there any issues around that at all - non-appearances, non-acceptances?

Ms IKEDIFE - No, we had a very high proportion of appearances. We had a drop off of non-appearances.

Mr O'BYRNE - Can you quantify the extra cost that was allocated to facilitate this change?

Ms IKEDIFE - I haven't added up just the Zoom elements. We had about \$16 000 in software and licences. We had about \$10 000 in office equipment, so that might have been additional phones; we had to buy additional conference phones for the courtrooms. We had some cabling that needed to be done. I am trying to add this up in my head as I go; it is probably about \$40 000 in the licences and computer IT elements.

Mr O'BYRNE - And staff training?

Ms IKEDIFE - Yes, that was on the run.

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Mr O'BYRNE - Has any of that expenditure been reversed? You have kept the capability? Essentially, that is like a foundational investment in that kind of capability.

Ms IKEDIFE - Yes, that is right. We do have the ongoing licensing fees and so on, which I have not categorised.

Mr O'BYRNE - They will appear in the forward Estimates?

Ms ARCHER - It is important to note that in our budget we allocated \$1.8 million in funding over two years for new replacement video conferencing and recording equipment, for both the Magistrates and Supreme courts.

Mr O'BYRNE - The money for the Zoom capability came in at \$1.8 million, or was that a new allocation?

Ms WEBSTER - That was COVID-19 funding.

Mr O'BYRNE - The \$1.8 million was COVID-19 funding?

Ms WEBSTER - The \$1.8 million is additional money that was allocated in the November Budget. There was funding that we were able to recuperate through the Department of Health that related specifically to the COVID-19 outlay. There was about \$255 000 across the Magistrates and Supreme courts - some of those costs that Penny has just mentioned. We were able to recuperate some of that, because it was outlaid expressly for COVID-19.

Mr O'BYRNE - That was administered by the Department of Health?

Ms WEBSTER - Yes. We paid for it, and we have a reimbursement through the Department of Health.

Mr WILLIE - That was from the supply bill that was passed by the parliament - the separate COVID-19 one?

CHAIR - On that point, on the costs, there would have been some savings as well, wouldn't there? Would there have been savings through the courts not having to sit as a court as such?

Ms ARCHER - There certainly were in the Supreme Court. I know Jim is itching to tell you that.

CHAIR - Some of these questions would relate to the Supreme Court area as well. It is a question I would ask Ginna as well, as to the savings we might have had through this process.

Ms IKEDIFE - We did not have any savings. We thought we would have a saving in witness expenses, without hearings going ahead.

CHAIR - Security, I would have thought.

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Ms IKEDIFE - No, also not. Our security was relied on very heavily to maintain control over the people who were in the buildings.

Mr O'BYRNE - Would that have been an extra cost for security?

Ms IKEDIFE - There was a little extra in some areas, in some regions; that was counteracted by others. For example, we were not sitting in Burnie for three weeks, so there was no need for security then. It roughly balanced out.

Mr O'BYRNE - Were they provided with PPE? Was that a decision taken?

Ms IKEDIFE - They certainly had the usual PPE; they usually have gloves, in any event. They did not have masks, but that was common across most locations, and they had hand sanitiser.

Ms ARCHER - That was in line with public health advice. I know Jim has some savings there.

CHAIR - Maybe we can go to Jim. Josh is on a different tack, so if there are any savings to the Supreme Court?

Mr CONNOLLY - We had both under-expenditure and over-expenditure, because we had jury trials suspended for four months in Hobart and Launceston, and seven and a half months in Burnie we had no jury expenses, and that gave us a saving of \$385 000.

Ms ARCHER - Burnie was different because of the capability of the Burnie court being far more restrictive in terms of space.

Mr CONNOLLY - Witness expenses were about \$63 000 less than the previous 12 months, but our court security was up by \$96 000. Additional cleaning costs were \$45 000 and supplies, materials, modifications to Burnie courtroom that the Attorney-General talked about was another \$121 000. So there were ons and offs.

Ms ARCHER - Yes, we've actually made permanent changes to the Burnie court.

Mr O'BYRNE - What was the impact on the waiting list for a court date? Obviously that's a key issue. I know there are savings in terms of productivity but justice delayed is a cost to the community, isn't it? What were the delays?

Ms IKEDIFE - We were required to limit the number of people coming into the buildings, so while the number of lodgements of police matters were maintained we had to push out the dates when they would come to their first appearance in court. We had to reduce the number of police bar matters by 50 per cent. Similarly with summons matters and push out the first appearance date. That has led to some delays.

Mr O'BYRNE - Can you quantify those delays?

Ms IKEDIFE - Our backlog increased in the months between April and June 2020 by 26 per cent.

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CHAIR - That's the backlog of all matters before the Petty Sessions?

Ms IKEDIFE - Yes. That was an increase of around 1900 cases.

Mr O'BYRNE - Wow, that's a lot, isn't it.

Ms IKEDIFE - It's quite significant.

Ms ARCHER - It was unavoidable.

Mr O'BYRNE - I understand. What measures are you putting in place to get back up? What's the delay at the minute? What's the 1900 figure? Where is that sitting?

Ms ARCHER - There are still restrictions in the court in how appearances are dealt with and the court limitations in each of the buildings which we can describe. Until we get back to a situation where we can have more people in each courtroom - Penny can explain how they handle that and get people in and out to try to keep the flow going. It's very much a physical restriction.

There's no secret that the legislation the Government put through to create efficiencies in all the procedures with the Magistrates Court is going to have a significant impact across the board in relation to backlogs. Until we get back to full-blown capacity in a physical sense in the court it's very difficult, I'd imagine, in terms of the full case load.

Mr O'BYRNE - Do you want to add anything to that?

Ms IKEDIFE - One of the measures we are taking is to try to stagger the listings to avoid the peaks and troughs of people coming to the building. We try to give people a specific time when they can come to the building, particularly with hearings where a large number of witnesses might increase the number of people coming to the door. If we can adjourn them off to a particular time at the beginning of the list then we've been doing that. That's really the best measure that we can find.

Mr O'BYRNE - The increase of 26 per cent, given there are still restrictions and then there's a practice note to now move back to preference face to face, that wouldn't be plateauing would it? The delays and the increase in the waiting time and the list would then be gradually increasing wouldn't it?

Ms ARCHER - I don't think that's the case, is it?

Ms IKEDIFE - We don't have any figures since the end of November 2020, I think.

Mr WILLIE - Are you able to provide those November figures?

Ms ARCHER - Don't forget Zoom technology didn't increase expediency, nor did it allow for hearings to occur. It was really just adjournment matters. Now hearings are occurring. There's a big difference.

Mr WILLIE - Could we have the November figures, if they're the latest ones?

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Ms ARCHER - In relation to the Supreme Court listings, there's not a lot of difference to returning back.

Mr O'BYRNE - Sorry, just go back. There was no increase in efficiency with Zoom. Surely there is?

Ms ARCHER - I'm going on the evidence Penny has given here today. Sometimes because of the technology and the waiting room process it didn't mean they were able to deal with more matters because it was over Zoom. In fact, in some cases, that slowed the processes. I understood what you were saying earlier.

Mr O'BYRNE - Is that fair?

Ms IKEDIFE - That's fair. We weren't able to do hearings by Zoom, for example, in the general sense, so the number of finalisations of matters decreased. This means that they're coming back for mentions but not finalisation.

Mr O'BYRNE - Based on current trajectories, how long is it going to take before you get back to the point you started at in existing waiting list pre-COVID-19? Is that going to take months or years to get back to that point?

Ms IKEDIFE - Approximately 14 months.

Mr O'BYRNE - From today, it will take 14 months to get back to pre-COVID-19 waiting times?

Ms IKEDIFE - That figure was calculated in November 2020 so there may be some variation to that now.

Ms ARCHER - That's based on restrictions, is it?

Ms IKEDIFE - Yes.

Mr WILLIE - My question follows on from that. We've gone through the lockdown period. There are a number of people who've lost their jobs. There is pressure on some families. Are you seeing any spikes in appearances in the areas, for example, whether it's domestic violence or survival crimes? Are the courts expecting, I guess, further pressure on that backlog for more appearances because of COVID-19-related circumstances?

Ms IKEDIFE - I don't have any data on that.

Ms ARCHER - I don't think anyone's received any data yet. I don't think the studies have been fully done in that regard. I'm going to take your point. A major concern of mine and other Attorneys-General throughout COVID-19 - we used to have phone hook-ups quite regularly and we had them with our respective Chief Justice, which is unheard of, you don't normally have judges meeting with their Attorneys-General - we were concerned about ensuring there was sufficient funding for family violence and the Family Court. That funding was provided by every state and territory and the federal government to ensure that those types of matters kept being dealt with, if there was higher demand in areas where there was family

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violence. I'd imagine the statistical data will start to show that if there was a spike. I'd imagine there probably was.

Mr WILLIE - What's the process for finding those trends? Is it the Department of Justice that looks at that, or the courts?

Ms ARCHER - It's the police.

CHAIR - On the restraint order issue, we can't get the figures of the numbers coming into the Court of Petty Sessions during the COVID-19 period - March through to probably now. Have they increased or have they remained somewhat static?

Ms IKEDIFE - We can get the figures on restraint orders and family violence. I have them to the end of the financial year. They were published in the annual report of the Magistrates Court, which I'm looking for at the moment. There wasn't a significant increase, at least in family violence orders issued. Having said that, police family violence orders often take off many of the urgent matters. I don't have data on the figures of police family violence.

Mr WILLIE - Continuing on the backlog, one of the risks to that increasing would be further lockdowns. I am interested in where court workers are in the vaccination program? If we're unfortunate to have another outbreak, you'd expect that as essential workers they'd be a high priority like lots of other areas, such as health workers, which I know is a key priority. There are other sectors I know where this could become a problem.

Ms WEBSTER - They are not in the emergency worker category like police, ambulance and emergency workers. I don't have information to hand about where they sit within the rollout, but I can provide that.

Mr WILLIE - I know it's an issue in Education. Teachers aren't in that first priority either and if there are outbreaks they'll have to face up, probably like court workers, in an outbreak situation.

CHAIR - I go to the Supreme Court with a similar question that we asked of the Petty Sessions. Have the number of lodgements in the criminal court during this period increased, decreased or are they similar? What are we seeing there? Has there been an increase in the backlog of cases, or, where are we?

Ms ARCHER - I am sure Jim has some figures there. I have met with the Chief Justice on a number of occasions. Certainly, in relation to any criminal backlog, you will note that there are trials that are proceeding again; and Jim will be able to confirm that pre-COVID-19 not every court was being utilised anyway. Now they are actually using civil courts for criminal matters as well.

I would not say we are back to normal, but the Chief is fairly pleased with how things are progressing in regard to dealing with case loads. I have also extended the acting judges for another two years, which gives an increased capability. We are about to embark on a recruitment through the usual judicial protocol for the seventh judge of the Supreme Court, which will go a long way as well.

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Mr CONNOLLY - The lodgement numbers have decreased by 3 per cent last financial year to the end of 30 June. Our backlog figure is sitting at about the 680 to 690 mark at the moment, which is still 30 per cent higher than five years ago when it was sitting at about 449.

During the COVID-19 period, as the Attorney-General said, when we were able to resume jury trials, we were able to run two criminal courts in Hobart, one in Launceston and eventually one in Burnie, four months later. As a result, we are actually holding our backlog figure at a static level at the moment whereas in previous years, as you would recall, there was an upward trajectory.

The Chief Justice is allocating judges to sit during appeal terms, not only sittings, during appeal terms and during court recesses. We are getting more sitting days in total throughout the year, so that is helping us to keep a lid on it. When the seventh permanent judge is due to commence on 1 July or thereabouts, then we can hopefully be starting to eat into that backlog and the using of the three acting judges with that additional sitting time.

Ms ARCHER - They are specific backlog measures that we deliberately put in place.

CHAIR - Thank you for that. How did the Zoom system work within the Criminal Court jurisdiction?

Mr CONNOLLY - The Supreme Court took a slightly different approach to the Magistrates Court. We were using about four different systems at one point. You remember the mad scramble in March when we were all trying to work out how we were going to change our business processes? We did a little bit of Zoom. Then we went to Skype for Business, which was already installed in the Supreme Court, so it was technology that was available. Before the necessity of COVID-19, we were not using it very much at all and definitely not in a courtroom application. It was usually only staff, managers, doing video links for meetings and that sort of thing.

We also had installed in our courtrooms, a polycom system. Polycom RealPresence is the product name. We were able to do video links through the courtroom. Our judges were working from home; their associates were at work in the courtrooms, and they were organising the bridging of these video links to legal practitioners in their offices, at their homes or wherever they were. The beauty of that was that we were able to record all the proceedings for the purposes of transcripts because it is integrated with our digital audio recording system. That is basically how it works.

We now have the next version of Microsoft Teams that has been rolled out by the department. It has the waiting rooms and break out rooms. We use them in court proceedings before judges or in mediations. We use all this technology now and it is becoming far more like second nature for everybody. It has been an improvement; but as the Attorney-General said there is nothing like in person, face-to-face proceedings, and particularly with juries it is absolutely essential. We have not conducted any jury trials with video link technology for the jurors. We might get a witness coming in on video link.

Ms ARCHER - You will note this week the decision that was made after submissions from both parties in relation to the Sue Neill-Fraser matter that was the Full Court of the Criminal Court of Appeal. I think it was by agreement of both parties and submissions that it could prejudice proceedings if things were done by utilising technology in terms of public

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having access. It is disappointing in a practical sense, but in a legal sense you can see how that decision was arrived at by the judges. I thought it was worth mentioning that. It shows that technology cannot always replace an in-person hearing environment. Having said that, the court has gone to extraordinary lengths to ensure that the media still has allocated places and spots to be able to report to the public in the public interest on that matter, and would do so on other matters as well.

CHAIR - Would it be right to say, as a result of COVID-19, that we have speeded up a lot of those processes that might have been considered in times to come but that that will be utilised now more, moving forward, than was previously?

Ms ARCHER - What I would like to see, in relation to technology, as the Attorney-General and minister - and in Corrections, where I have seen it work well, and been prepared to put money where my mouth is - is the capability of broadcasting to prison, so that we are not transporting prisoners in simply for appearances and things where really it can be conducted by way of Zoom or other technology. I think that works very well. I thank the Director of Prisons too, for entering discussions in that regard, because also around the state we need to have the appropriate facilities for that in terms of the people that are incarcerated being able to utilise that technology. I know it does work well for the Magistrates Court as well, and that is where you can create efficiencies.

As Penny has identified, there are areas where it does not create efficiencies as well and you wouldn't take those idea forward; but the areas where it creates efficiencies then it has my full support.

CHAIR - This question is across both areas - Petty Sessions and the Supreme Court. During the COVID-19 period, did we see an increase or marked decreases in any particular criminal activity coming through and into the courts? Were there any changes in the matters coming before the courts?

Mr CONNOLLY - Speaking for the Supreme Court, there was nothing noticeable anecdotally. I haven't done the analysis of the crime types and the types of lodgements coming in. There was nothing noticeable from our end but then again, we received everything from the Magistrates Court so they would notice it first by the time it gets committed.

Ms ARCHER - You had fewer lodgements, didn't you?

Mr CONNOLLY - Yes.

CHAIR - If I could ask in relation to Petty Sessions, and I was also going to ask in relation to the Youth Court as to what the position was there during this critical period?

Ms IKEDIFE - We didn't notice any change but that is not data that we usually review on a day-to-day basis. Beyond saying that there was a 1 per cent increase in restraint orders and a 2 per cent in family violence orders that was all that we saw. I think there was a slight drop in youth matters. As to the make up of the types of charges that were coming before the court, I am not aware of any significant changes but I do not have that data.

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CHAIR - Have we seen any changes in the coronial area of the courts? In other words, where has that backlog gone over the COVID-19 period?

Ms ARCHER - The Coroners Court was actually shut down for a period, wasn't it, Penny?

CHAIR - What is the impact there going to be?

Ms IKEDIFE - The coronial division ceased all inquests.

Ms ARCHER - That was the coroner's wish, wasn't it?

Ms IKEDIFE - That's right, up until mid-June 2020. That was done fairly quickly. However, statistically, their clearance rate was very good in the 2019-20 year. They were then able to turn their attention to all of those matters which didn't require an inquest. They issued many findings during that period for non-inquest matters, so their completion rates were very good.

CHAIR - Where are we at with the matters requiring an inquest, Attorney-General?

Ms ARCHER - I'd have to refer to figures.

CHAIR - I know the annual report covered this, but we've moved on from there.

Ms IKEDIFE - They are being relisted, or listed for inquest, and progressing in the usual course of events. I don't have figures specifically on inquests. We look at the overall number of coronial matters, because it's often further down the track that it becomes apparent that they are an inquest matter.

Mr WILLIE - Chair, I was going to suggest we could ask some questions on prisons soon, given we only have a little bit of time left?

CHAIR - No, we have prisons separately. Prisons come in after this, I think.

Mr WILLIE - It's listed as Arts.

Ms ARCHER - Arts is at 1.10 p.m., so this is all. I have my director of Prisons here.

CHAIR - You are right. I was misreading that, sorry.

Ms ARCHER - If you've exhausted the courts questions, I am very happy to -

Mr O'BYRNE - I wouldn't say we've exhausted it, minister. We're allocating time as best we can.

CHAIR - I don't think we have, so thanks Josh for that.

Ms ARCHER - We can get Ian Thomas up to the table if you like. For COVID-19 reasons, if Ian joins us at the spare spot. I wouldn't leave until we're finished.

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CHAIR - I probably should say, too, with the information coming forward, it's likely that this committee could ask you to come back again, because we are looking at the recovery process as well, which is a very important part of our functions in this inquiry.

Ms ARCHER - We have Mr Ian Thomas, Director of the Tasmania Prison Service.

CHAIR - Ian is well known to all members at the table. I ask Ian if he could take the declaration please.

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Mr IAN THOMAS, DIRECTOR OF PRISONS, WAS CALLED, MADE THE STATUTORY DECLARATION AND WAS EXAMINED.

CHAIR - Attorney-General, are there any opening remarks in relation to this area, or can we get straight into questions?

Ms ARCHER - I can be very brief. Again, I am extremely proud of what the department, through Ginna Webster, has been able to achieve, and of course through Ian Thomas and his management of the prison.

Also, we are not forgetting Community Corrections, but the focus is always on the prison. Had we had a positive result in the prison, then you can imagine it could have been disastrous. Ian will be able to take you through a lot of those measures, but we did need to go to extraordinary lengths to ensure there were isolation unit areas of the prison, which meant we had to utilise old parts of the prison.

In that regard we put in a significant amount of additional funding, to also have increased capability using the O'Hara units, which are typically a low-security area for prisoners who are transitioning into release, and putting in a more secure fence around that area, so that we could have a broader range of security requirements should we need to use it, or for an isolation area.

The old prison hospital has been utilised as well.

I am happy to report we conducted training of recruits, and that recruitment courses still continued. There was a delay with one of them, but throughout last year we still held three - or two?

Mr THOMAS - Three.

Ms ARCHER - Three, thank you. We utilised the police academy for one, to keep the recruits safe, and still did practical components at the prison. They are now fully back in the prison environment. The prison is still operating with some COVID-19 measures, although they have relaxed. Should we have a positive case, then Ian and his team are ready to reinstate things at the drop of a hat, so to speak. There are still certain measures at the prison, as I said, but things have relaxed slightly.

There have been a few scares where people have come back from Melbourne, for example, if there's been an outbreak there. The staff have been wonderful, I must say, at identifying straight away whether they need to self-isolate. If they have symptoms themselves, they have taken themselves out of the picture by not turning up at work. Indeed, there are temperature checks every day, in any event.

That's a brief run-down of what we can go into more detail about.

Mr WILLIE - Minister, do you have an overall budget impact for COVID-19 measures in the prison?

Ms ARCHER - I will throw to the secretary or Ian in relation to that.

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Mr THOMAS - In overall terms, I think it's around \$3 million - so that's \$2 million in infrastructure and PPE costs, et cetera, and around \$1 million in overtime.

Mr WILLIE - Through you, minister, how did the staffing work through the lockdown? Did you have to split the staff roster so you had staff not interacting with each other? Can you talk us through that?

Mr THOMAS - Thank you, minister. Exactly that. We made a decision early on that we needed to maintain safety for all, but we still needed to operate the prisons, so we quickly moved to a split roster system in all the prisons for our correctional staff, an A and a B, which meant a different roster pattern for the staff. It meant that if we had an outbreak in team B in any facility, we could still operate. That was day and nightshift, so we had two sets of nightshifts operating as well. That was where some of the overtime was going to occur, and we deliberately built that in, so at least we could control and manage it to some degree.

Even with our non-correctional staff, where they needed to access facilities such as health, maintenance, et cetera, wherever possible we moved to an A and a B team, or we allocated people to specific prisons.

Other non-correctional staff, such as offender management, worked remotely, in the main. They worked from home and used Zoom technology, et cetera, to be able to access prisoners quite effectively during the period.

Mr WILLIE - Minister, how hard was it to maintain social distancing in the correctional facilities, given the infrastructure, and perhaps the compliance of inmates?

Mr THOMAS - Through you, minister. At times it's impossible, to be honest. We consistently messaged the importance of social distancing. Certainly, in all the staff areas, such as restrooms, et cetera, we put social distancing in place, moving tables, chairs, that kind of stuff, and a lot of signage went out.

Where we could with prisoners, we managed social distancing, but the real intent with prisoners was the isolation strategy, so we moved to that in early April. Every prisoner coming into the TPS spent 14 days in isolation, so that by the time we moved them into the facilities, knowing we couldn't 100 per cent manage social distancing, we were much less likely to have a risk of an outbreak.

Ms ARCHER - If I could add, the risk in the prison system was it being introduced into the population. These prisoners all live together. It's a similar environment, if you like - just a much larger scale - to how we dealt with family situations where you didn't have to social distance. The real emphasis was on anyone entering a prison, and of course it was staff on a daily basis, or new prisoners coming in, or remandees. As Ian said, there was that isolation part.

Overall, I think it was done in a very cooperative manner, because everybody realised that it was for everybody's safety that, for those 14 days, that particular person coming in wouldn't have contact with others until they'd served that 14-day period.

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Mr WILLIE - Minister, there would have been an impact to families having access to people in the prison.

Ms ARCHER - There was a positive impact, I'd like to report, because we increased technology, whereas it wasn't readily available in any frequent sense prior to that. It all went to fully online visits - and so you even had the family dog being present, which may sound a little bit silly, but prisoners don't get to see their family dog very often. With that sort of access, a lot of them have continued, haven't they, Ian, opting for that option. That is something that I am encouraging that we continue, and that we continue to fund, because there have been some enormous benefits and positives.

Mr THOMAS - We cancelled face-to-face visits in late March. By early May we had introduced Zoom visits, with similar technology to the courts, although at a very low level we were doing some Zoom visits for families, particularly in the north-west of the state. By the end of July, we had done in excess of 2000 Zoom visits. We had done Zoom visits to the US, Switzerland and every state in Australia. There was a massive pick-up - in excess of 80 per cent. We did a survey of the visits for all the groups affected by it and the feedback was hugely positive, so we have embedded video visits now as business as usual and the take-up is still significant and very positively received.

Ms ARCHER - In person visits are now reinstated, so we have both coexisting.

Mr WILLIE - The other area is lock-downs, and whether COVID-19 had an impact on that, if you have staff who are unable to enter the prison because they are showing symptoms or whatever else. Was there an increase in lockdowns at the prison?

Ms ARCHER - Yes. Before I get Ian to go into more detail, obviously that is a concern that you might need to have increased lockdowns in regard to isolation measures, but Ian was fairly intent on only doing that when it was necessary. However, it was part of the strategy, wasn't it Ian, in relation to the isolation of parts of the prison?

Mr THOMAS - Yes. Lockdowns did increase, but again as much as we could, we planned that in with the approach to split rosters. We knew split rosters meant that we would potentially increase the number of lockdowns but, wherever possible, we made that predictable and we forecast it in advance so prisoners knew when their time out of cell would be limited for that day or period of the day, rather than it be a haphazard approach. The static rosters allowed us to do that, as well as in the prisons that were operating in isolation strategy. By default, it meant that those prisoners were spending an extended period in their cell for that 14 days. The number of lockdowns increased but we were still able to provide prisoners with some time out of cell every day.

Mr WILLIE - Do you have some figures on the lockdown increase that the committee is able to have?

Mr THOMAS - I do not have detailed figures, but a good example is our ROGS data around the time out of cell average. For last year, it was 7.1 hours and the previous year it was 7.9 hours, so overall there was drop of 0.8 hours.

Ms ARCHER - You might want to explain what 'out of cell' means.

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Mr THOMAS - Time out of cell is any time that the prisoners get in the open air, whether they are out of the cell but in the unit, or out in the open air, or attending an activity, whatever that might be.

Ms ARCHER - When Ian says 'cell', it is not the confine of a cell, it is the whole unit. There is the common area where they have the toasted sandwich machine, the TV and all that.

Mr WILLIE - Did that capture the whole COVID-19 period in the ROGS data, because it is delayed usually?

Mr THOMAS - It captured the first half of COVID-19 but not the second half. The second half from 1 July onwards will be captured in this reporting year.

Mr O'BYRNE - There has been a lot of media and reports around the lockdowns, even prior to COVID-19. On any given day, would you say it would be fair to say that at least one section of the facility is in a form of lockdown?

Mr THOMAS - The easy answer is yes, but there are a lot of descriptions or evidence behind that. That could be that there is an incident and we need to lock down the prison to safely manage that incident or remove the prisoners from it. It could be that we have some technical difficulties, power failures, et cetera. It could be that we have staffing issues on that day or we have staff training running - so there is a whole raft of reasons why lockdowns will occur within that.

The number of lockdowns that occur solely because of staff shortages has significantly reduced and that will not happen on a daily basis. So, yes, we would have a lockdown on a daily basis but a lot of those might affect 10 prisoners for 15 minutes, i.e. you have had an incident in a unit. The lockdowns that affect hundreds of prisoners for half a day or a whole day are few and far between.

Ms ARCHER - We should start to see some positives in the figures because of the recruits coming on in terms of the staffing, and also the new rostering system that Ian's put in place now, for how long?

Mr THOMAS - Close to two years now, minister.

Ms ARCHER - Close to two years. Not the split roster that we're talking about during COVID-19 but the actual overhaul of the roster system.

CHAIR - I will go to Nic now because he was next on the line.

Mr STREET - I didn't get a chance to jump in while we were talking about the Zoom or the online family visits. Are they monitored in the same way that person-to-person visits are monitored?.

Mr THOMAS - In essence, yes. The way we have ours set up, depending on the prison, is broadly there'd be about six iPads in the room. Prisoners sit at the iPad with headphones on and there's one officer managing a group of five or six. All the video visits are recorded, and

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they're warned in advance that they're recorded. We can also go back and check afterwards for any inappropriate behavior or things like that.

Mr STREET - Excellent. Thank you.

CHAIR - If members are right and the Attorney-General is right we can proceed until 10 past and we will pick up a bit more time if that's alright. If everyone is happy with that.

Ms ARCHER - I am here so that's fine.

Mr O'BYRNE - The minister's evidence referred to sick leave and the custodial staff when the officer's doing the right thing if they're not coming in. What's been the noticeable difference in sick leave? Has it increased or has it decreased due to COVID-19?

Mr THOMAS - During the COVID-19 period overall there was actually a decrease in sick leave. Staff attendance improved slightly. It's difficult to quantify that in any one term.

Mr O'BYRNE - Were there more lockdowns, people felt safer?

Mr THOMAS - I think mainly to be honest it wasn't just unique to the staff but with the prisoners as well. This was well, we're kind of all in this together so let's rally together and work through it that you could.

Ms ARCHER - Despite the alarming comments certainly by commentators in the media, saying there'd be unrest in the prison and they'd all be assaulting each other because they're cooped up, it was the exact opposite, wasn't it? The prisoners were really cooperative. They understood the measures were for safety reasons, and they actually felt really reassured. That was the feedback.

Mr O'BYRNE - What percentage decrease in the sick leave?

Mr THOMAS - I wouldn't have those figures but we could provide them.

Ms ARCHER - We can undertake to get that, yes.

Mr THOMAS - Yes.

Mr O'BYRNE - I was familiar with the old rostering system in my previous union days with the correctional officers' union. Of the positions on the roster on any given day, are they all filled - or do you have to go to the recall list to fill the roster on a day to day basis?

Mr THOMAS - On a day to day basis, one of the options we'll use will be recalls but again it can vary on a day, so we use a number of things. In some of the facilities we have tasks that are identified as what we call flexible tasks so its -

Mr O'BYRNE - Like a GD, general duties.

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Mr THOMAS - Yes, it might be in an area that is not accommodation based, so you can make a decision not to use that task that day - but it doesn't affect the ability to unlock the prison or get the prisoners out of cell and access to the services.

If we exhaust those then we'll go to the recall list. Right across the prisons, given the nature of the operations and things like medical escorts, emergency escorts, there will be some type of overtime in use every day. Some of it is predictable; some of it is a consequence of what's occurring in the prison.

Mr O'BYRNE - Just one more question on the lockdowns. When the *Ruby Princess* spread occurred on the north-west and when we went into - nothing when it's compared to Victorian hard lockdown, but the kind of lockdown that we had in our community - what did that mean for the day-to-day operations of the correctional facilities across the state? Did you go into a similar kind of lockdown? What were the arrangements that you put in place? Did it mirror the community lockdown?

Mr THOMAS - It did; but I think in essence, by the time that outbreak occurred in the north-west we were already in that space. We made a decision fairly early on that, as I think the minister alluded to earlier. Our approach from day one was to stop this getting into the prisons. Our restrictions and lockdown strategy in response to COVID-19 probably went deeper quicker than in the community, to really make sure that the chance of it getting into the prisons was minimal.

Mr O'BYRNE - Were correctional officers issued with PPE then, if that was harder than the broader community and training provided?

Mr THOMAS - Yes. We took advice from Public Health and were able to provide appropriate training as to how to don the PPE, right through to whether it was only normal prison operations but being aware of COVID-19. Through Public Health were able to get advice on the type of PPE to use, how to don it and how to engage with somebody who would be COVID-19 positive.

Mr O'BYRNE - Was there any period in the early days where as a matter of course people were issued and used it, or was it only there to be used in the case of a circumstance?

Mr THOMAS - We issued PPE to all the facilities so there was plenty for staff to use every day. That was masks, gloves, gowns, face guards, et cetera. Based on Public Health advice, the direction we gave, particularly to reception prisons, which is where the new people into custody were coming in, was when you are engaging with somebody who is coming in off the street use PPE, wear gloves, wear a mask.

Mr O'BYRNE - From a number of reports, there is talk of higher than usual occupancy in some of the sleeping areas. That is a risk, regardless, because you have people in pretty tight circumstances against the original design of the facility. What mitigation measures did you put in place to manage both the security risk and the potential COVID-19 risk in that environment where you have more people than you are supposed to have?

Mr THOMAS - Our initial response was to ensure that we had enough isolation beds for the different categories and cohorts of prisoners. We did a very quick analysis about roughly how many people we got in each week, and how many beds we needed to create maximum,

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medium and minimum security. From that we identified beds in the two reception prisons for maximum security and then we had division 8 unit in women's stood up as our isolation centres. That meant we could isolate every new reception coming in for 14 days. It bought us 14 days, if you like, to manage the population that they would go into when they had finished their isolation period.

In conjunction with that, some of the bunk beds we have installed as part of our surge capacity across the state were in greater and more frequent use than they would be normally, because we were having to keep people isolated.

Often when somebody had finished isolation and if there wasn't a single cell accommodation for them to go to immediately, they would spend a short period of time in a double cell until they went on to single accommodation. The priority was that everybody for that period could isolate for 14 days.

Ms ARCHER - I will add to that. If we could have moved people off and isolated them at another site, if there was one available - and there wasn't because we searched high and low and you can imagine the lengths we went to - then we would have done that. However, we needed to do it on the site itself.

Mr O'BYRNE - We heard before there was a blowout in waiting time to get matters before the court. What impact did that have on the population?

Mr THOMAS - The population stayed reasonably static throughout COVID-19.

Ms ARCHER - It actually reduced.

Mr THOMAS - Towards the end of COVID-19, yes. We were sitting at around 630 average prior to COVID-19 starting. We are sitting at 626 this morning.

Mr O'BYRNE - Did the COVID-19 restrictions have any impact on your categorisation in regard to inmate management? Going through low, medium and high, did the COVID-19 restrictions place any extra pressure on how you managed behaviours of inmates and where you put them?

Ms ARCHER - Classifications?

Mr O'BYRNE - Yes, that is the word. It has been a long week in parliament.

Mr THOMAS - Not significantly in the actual classification process but we did need to be aware of where we could hold these people because of some of the accommodation we were using for isolation units. Probably the biggest impact was on minimum security prisoners who pre-COVID-19 had been working in the community. We deliberately, for a period, stopped people going out on sections. That was one of the biggest issues. It was not classification per se, but there was a period of around four months when prisoners were not going out and working in the community.

Ms ARCHER - Those communities really wanted them back too. We received a lot of inquiries about that.

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Mr WILLIE - It occurred to me, if there are more meetings taking place over Zoom, is that having an impact on contraband that's being found on people entering the prison?

Ms ARCHER - Do you mean as in less?

Mr WILLIE - Yes, as in less, and also drug and alcohol use within the prison walls. Are we seeing any positive impact on the Zoom meetings in that regard?

Mr THOMAS - Definitely, yes. From talking to colleagues around Australia in other states I think they've seen the same with initiatives we've put in place around Zoom visits. We introduced a process called, 'Email a Prisoner' where families could email prisoners rather than sending in hard letters or cards, which again reduces the opportunity for contraband to come in. We saw a significant drop in the level of contraband and even prisoners testing positive for drugs during the COVID-19 period.

Mr WILLIE - It's still present?

Mr THOMAS - Yes, it's still present. Now we're back into running face-to-face visits as well as Zoom, we're starting to see a slight increase in that space, which is not unexpected.

Ms ARCHER - It's interesting that it does correlate.

Mr WILLIE - People moving in and out of the prison, that's where the opportunity is for people to do those sorts of things. How did the COVID-19 period impact rehabilitation for prisoners? I know some literacy programs - I was supposed to come to present some awards when it was cancelled. Education happens, there's drug and alcohol rehabilitation - some of those things may have had to have stopped through that period. Have they resumed?

Ms ARCHER - Yes, it's impacted on our group programs, hasn't it, Ian?

Mr THOMAS - Yes. Programs that were group programs or needed to be delivered face-to-face to have the right impact were significantly impacted, particularly for that four-month period in the early part of COVID-19 when we were pretty much locked down across the state apart from essential services.

We did move quite quickly to either remote learning or face-to-face for a lot of counselling. Our IAM [?] team was quite innovative so they took up the challenge of Zoom quite quickly and were able to talk to prisoners on a one-to-one basis via Zoom. It didn't completely replace what was running pre-COVID but it certainly put a holding pattern in place.

Ms ARCHER - It's not like they didn't have any contact. They did have contact. It was just a different form of contact.

Mr WILLIE - There's probably some advantages to that. Could we increase education opportunities for inmates through technology, whether it's TAFE courses or a whole range of other things? Is the prison service looking at that?

Mr THOMAS - Yes definitely. The agreement we signed with TAFE at the end of last year will allow us to really explore those opportunities now. We have a number of online learning opportunities. A prisoner student can talk to a TAFE teacher remotely rather than

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them having to come to the site, particularly if it's one-to-one learning or counselling. There is certainly a lot of interest in how we can expand the use of virtual technology with all our external stakeholders.

Mr WILLIE - I'm aware in the past it's been difficult to get TAFE teachers and others to teach in the prison, so that might remove some of those barriers?

Mr THOMAS - It's still preferable to get them face-to-face but there are some opportunities, particularly as I say with individual learning groups that we have, where the student could do that face-to-face learning or advice from the teacher.

CHAIR - We are now eating into the Arts side of things but I'm prepared to go just a little longer.

Mr O'BYRNE - In the organisation's view, what were the major risks that were being presented for the custodial officers in their work and their safety, and what measures did you take to mitigate those risks?

Mr THOMAS - There was one main risk for the custodial staff. All the staff groups are important but they were the one staff group for which we had to maintain a level of service. Without them it would be very difficult to maintain any level of routine or regime within the prisons, which is why we quickly moved to a split roster process in late April so we could reduce the impact of a potential outbreak in correctional staff.

We were also aware that they were, in some ways, a high-risk group to bring it in because they were in and out of the prisons 24/7. There was also the potential impact on their families and friends if they were to test positive or show symptoms.

We were very keen to get information to them at the front end. We spend a lot of time - two, three, four times a day - briefing the staff on what the latest information is, what our strategies were; but everything we did was about their safety - so PPE was, and still is, a priority.

Like my colleagues in the courts said earlier, we put in place very quickly a significantly enhanced cleaning regime across all the prison, including using prisoners where it was appropriate. Temperature checking was installed early, so we could provide staff with that ability to self-regulate. And we involved staff. We ran a number of contingency plan exercises as well. We stepped them through, in the event of an outbreak, how would we manage it in our prisons - to give them some level of assurance that our plans will keep us safe if we follow them.

Overall the main thing was simply about communication. We could never guarantee completely that this thing won't get into our prisons - has been seen across society - but everything we're doing reduces the risk, and what we will do if we did get a positive test or an outbreak.

As the minister said earlier, the staff were great. As long as we kept them informed, they were really engaged. They understood this wasn't something we could easily control. They really sought that information, so I and the managers spent a lot of time engaging them. We

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set up a communications hub which ran 24/7 for many months, and both face-to-face, email and briefings, et cetera.

Ms ARCHER - We even planned for an outbreak in terms of food, so we had frozen food in back up in units in case -

Mr THOMAS - We had two sea containers full of it.

Ms ARCHER - the prison couldn't operate as normal, so everybody was still fed. Although people thought that it was a morgue.

Mr WILLIE - There was food being made at Blundstone too, wasn't there?

Mr O'BYRNE - The staff at Blundstone have a contract, haven't they?

CHAIR - You have talked about you are prepared somewhat should there be an outbreak within the prison. Does the physical make-up of the prison, as it currently is, put you in a position to be able to cope adequately with that; or would you see that moving forward there would need to be some physical changes to the prison and its development to manage a pandemic? There might be another cause, another pandemic.

Ms ARCHER - It's always ideal to have more units because of that capability of isolation, and the way we utilised the reception prisons in Hobart and Launceston was specifically so that we didn't introduce it into the main prison.

We're all looking forward to the southern remand centre coming online and operating. It's due to be completed in construction terms at the end of the year. That will not only help with separating and classification separation, but will obviously bring more beds online. That will be a welcome relief. And then a northern prison facility, to ensure the capability of numbers moving forward as well.

Mr O'BYRNE - That's a long way away though, isn't it?

Ms ARCHER - You have to start somewhere, and nobody else had. We know that the Launceston reception prison is on a lifeline. That really shouldn't be used the way it is. We make no secret of that, and that's why we want a northern facility.

CHAIR - Were there any plans in place in case of that breakout with the other prisons in Australia? Did you have any bigger management plan in place? An exchange of prisoners, movement of prisoners - was that considered at all?

Ms ARCHER - I don't think we did because of the risk.

Mr THOMAS - No, minister. I met regularly with my counterparts in all the other states, and New Zealand was involved in that hook-up as well. We used to speak every week about what we were doing and some of the issues they were facing, particularly in the states where they did have positive tests in prisons. We were able to share learnings and initiatives and ideas; but there was never really a discussion around how you might manage if you have a large outbreak - probably with the exception of the ACT and New South Wales who already

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have a similar arrangement outside of COVID-19. We certainly talked about sharing resources but not about moving prisoners around.

Ms ARCHER - Generally, to wrap up, is the extraordinary cooperation between states and territories and indeed Commonwealth. When I was talking about the courts and the Attorneys-General working with the Chiefs, and in terms of the prison system with Ian being able to access his counterparts which he does anyway, but the frequency in which we did that, by either Zoom or Zoom-type meetings or by telephone, was really valuable. The takeaway from that is that sort of cooperation is really useful for a smaller jurisdiction like us as well, and not reinventing the wheel, perhaps.

CHAIR - Unless there are any other important questions, I need to move on. I thank you, Attorney-General, for your court and prison staff here today. Thank you very much for the way you answered the questions. We appreciate that very much. We will move pretty well into the arts area.

THE WITNESSES WITHDREW.

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CHAIR (Mr Dean) - We all know each other, so we do not need introductions. If we could ask Kim and Jacquie to take the declaration.

Mr KIM EVANS AND **Ms JACQUIE ALLEN** WERE CALLED, MADE THE STATUTORY DECLARATION AND WERE EXAMINED.

CHAIR - Minister, do you wish to make any opening remarks? We will go into questions following on from that.

Ms ARCHER - I would like to run through a few initiatives. Everyone here knows how important our arts industry is, not only to this state, but to me personally. It is something I feel very passionate about, and have supported for many years.

Prior to COVID-19, it was one the fastest growing sectors in this state, contributing around \$179 million a year to our economy, and employing over 5000 Tasmanians. Obviously, COVID-19 has had a significant impact, and has been extremely challenging for our arts community. Social gathering restrictions has meant that most work in the arts industry ceased almost overnight, and indeed overnight, with many of our cultural and creative organisations, businesses and events forced into hibernation. In addition, some of our iconic venues, such as TMAG, QVMAG and Theatre Royal, were also closed. QVMAG is not state owned; it is owned by the Launceston City Council, but we do provide a significant amount of funding to them. Our state collection is at TMAG, and Theatre Royal also has obvious importance to us.

I acknowledge their incredible resilience and cooperation so early in the pandemic. I was very pleased that we - and I will be very careful not to say we were the first state to act, because another state will probably try to correct me - but we were definitely one of the first states to act, in March in fact. There was an outbreak, and we had a stimulus of an additional \$1.5 million to screen, contemporary music and arts organisations.

In addition, arts organisations that were businesses accessed nearly \$4.3 million in support through the Small Business Sustainability and Recovery Grant program. Also, \$3.8 million in capital funding went to TMAG. That addressed some significant maintenance and upgrade issues, and had the link to the building and construction industry as well, with it being an essential service. So, we managed to get a significant amount done, not only at the TMAG site, but the related sites it oversees, and we can go into that in more detail.

The Government's framework for COVID-19 safe events and activities meant there were restrictions, and we can deal with that today, as to the easing of those.

I am very pleased to report that Tasmania is seen as a safe haven, so the SBS production, *The Tailings*, was recently filming in Tasmania on the west coast, which is terribly exciting, as has series five of *Rosehaven*. The screen industry has been able to get up and running.

Throughout this period, I also released the recovery strategy. It started off as our strategy, but it would have been pretty ridiculous to release a strategy that didn't address COVID-19, so it morphed into the Recovery Strategy: 2020 and Beyond. It has the new \$4 million in additional funding to the arts sector attached to its initiatives, I am very pleased to report.

Not only did we have stimulus funding, there's also the \$4 million worth of additional funding. I can share with you today in more detail how that's being directed, by way of the arts

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recovery support initiative, the New Work for New Markets initiative - something I'm very fond of, because community arts is something that I've wanted to address. We have allocated \$1 million to community and cultural development at the grassroots level.

We've also put in an additional \$500 000 over two years to the Screen Innovation Fund, which was a new fund I implemented coming into this portfolio.

Finally, the Live Performance Support Program is now open as well, to give some surety to performances and events. Should circumstances change, the Government will also take some responsibility for those cancellations, and provide relief of between \$10 000 and up to \$100 000 for any cancellation of events. We can go into that in more detail, too.

CHAIR - I will ask the opening question. It virtually happened overnight that the industry was closed down. That must have had a huge impact on the emotions and mental health, all of those issues, for people working in this area. Minister, what has been the fallout of that, and what issues are you currently confronting in that area?

Ms ARCHER - I should thank the Department of State Growth. Through Jacquie Allen and Arts Tasmania, and Screen Tasmania, they've done a wonderful job of staying connected with our usual recipients, or other art people they regularly engage with in our arts community and our screen industry community.

Screen was able to keep going more in terms of digital content. Our music industry could apply for the stimulus funding released in March that I mentioned. That was specifically designed to ensure that people could still work and have that income, particularly if they weren't eligible for JobKeeper.

A lot of people who work in the arts industry also rely on jobs in hospitality and we know how hospitality was deeply impacted during COVID-19. That's why we came out with the stimulus very early. That's also why I have the initiatives in the Budget with additional funding for New Work for New Markets, so our individual artists and arts organisations could operate.

It's important to note that as part of our original stimulus we extended the contracts of all the arts organisations that were receiving funding from Government to give them certainty. All their organisation funding was at the stage where they needed to reapply. Rather than them having to apply during COVID-19 we extended those contracts to give them and those who worked with them certainty. That addressed a large component - not all artists - but we did what we could with the stimulus funding and the arts organisations funding to keep them going.

CHAIR - How much of the stimulus funding was accessed? What was the cost of that? What did these people do in the meantime? Were they still engaging with the industry somewhere or were they simply at home?

Ms ARCHER - Mr O'Byrne just said some are on JobKeeper, some, as I said, weren't eligible for JobKeeper for whatever reason. We engaged people to work with online content. I'm pleased to report the Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra, although they have surety of funding by other means through the state government and through this portfolio specifically, some of their individual artists worked together and in partnership with other arts practitioners to produce digital content and music. The TSO did podcasts, for example, and kept things online.

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People transitioned to social media and provided arts content that way. People accessed the stimulus funding for that purpose.

I think you mentioned something about how much in monetary terms? Jacquie can probably address that.

CHAIR - I did. How many people are we talking about here?

Ms ALLEN - I can't give you a number on the individuals. I can let you know that the \$1.5 million stimulus funding has all been allocated. As the minister said, we looked at programs that would allow people to do the work that they could do -

Ms ARCHER - With COVID-19 restrictions we mean.

Ms ALLEN - That's right. One of the funding programs was an arts and screen fund. That was the first time we've brought together arts practitioners with screen practitioners and given them a specific bucket of funding to create digital and online content. We also provided additional funding through Screen - \$250 000 for the Screen Development Fund. The development stage of the Screen project is something that can be done at home, online. It doesn't require large numbers of people on set.

Mr WILLIE - Minister, has the impact of COVID-19 been quantified on the creative arts industry, on the performing arts in particular but postponed, cancelled events and that sort of disruption? I think you said it was a \$179 million industry and 5000 jobs. Have we looked into the impacts?

Ms ARCHER - I am not sure if we are able to give specifics about how many events were cancelled other than to say there was a period where everything was cancelled. As to quantifying the amount -

Ms ALLEN - The \$179 million figure is taken from ABS stats in which there's a bit of a lag. We are only now in the position where we are receiving financial reporting from organisations, so we're not yet in a position where we'd be able to put a dollar figure on activity that didn't happen.

Mr WILLIE - Or the number of jobs that have been lost?

Ms ALLEN - Not at this stage, no.

Mr WILLIE - Minister, are you concerned about the end of JobKeeper in terms of this industry? I think it's been mentioned that a number of people are on JobKeeper and it is impacted because of the restrictions that are currently in place.

Ms ARCHER - One of the things in this area was that a lot of people weren't eligible for JobKeeper, which is why we put a significant amount of money into the stimulus funding. My biggest fear was that they couldn't access JobKeeper. Anecdotally we had a lot of contact from people saying they were not eligible for anything. The positive comments -

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Mr O'Byrne - It doesn't lead to permanent work because they're doing a whole lot of short-term contracts.

Ms ARCHER - No, but I am answering the specific question that it wasn't as applicable to this industry as many others. Many people have relied on the stimulus funding or other grand funding, bearing in mind we still rolled out our usual rounds of grant funding under Arts Tasmania and Screen Tasmania where we could, so it kept the ball rolling.

A lot of people were able to access funding regardless. Of course, anybody has concern about a funding stream no longer being available. I'm a realist in this sense and this is why, in my other portfolios as well, we have to go through a transition to getting everybody as much as we can back to - I hesitate to say - normal. JobKeeper can't go on forever so the federal government is going through a transition. It's entirely up to them how they do that.

What I'm concerned about is the focus on my portfolio and providing support that I can through Arts Tasmania, through Screen Tasmania. We're doing that through the additional funding in the Budget.

Mr WILLIE - The risk in this portfolio area if people ended up on JobSeeker, and that's now being reduced as well, is that they look for work in other industries and they're lost to this industry. We want to try to retain as many performing arts and other forms of the arts.

Ms ARCHER - I can't give you any specific examples because I haven't had anyone come to me with that specific issue. By and large, everybody, when I am at an event because events are now starting up again, says thank you for the stimulus funding. They are now saying thank you for the additional funding in the arts, because they have not had it before. They have not had a minister that is focused on additional funding for the arts. That's what I have been fighting for for many years.

Mr WILLIE - It has been COVID-19 stimulus-related.

Ms ARCHER - No. \$4 million that I have put into this Budget is additional funding. It would have happened regardless of COVID-19.

Mr WILLIE - Okay. If we can move to the performing arts. There is still a 75 per cent capacity restriction on venues. It is my understanding that Public Health has to be involved if you want to go over the 250 limit. Other states appear to be doing different things. You have announced some more measures there in regard to \$10 000 to \$100 000 guarantee -

Ms ARCHER - The live performance initiative.

Mr WILLIE - What sort of consultation have you had with the industry and is \$10 000 to \$100 000 enough, particularly for those larger events? I could not see that being enough of a guarantee.

Ms ARCHER - That particular funding is to give them certainty to plan events that will fit within that amount of money. We are talking about productions. They can pre-apply. I announced yesterday that they should put their applications in, so that when they are planning events from now they can do so knowing that there will be a pre-approved amount from the

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department that they will receive. It is up to them to decide whether or not to take the risk of having an event or a performance should conditions change.

In relation to the framework, everybody has concentrated on other states doing other things; some states having 100 per cent capacity. When you look at the detail, they still have the two-metre social distancing rule. I will revert to Jacquie in a moment to explain some of those jurisdictional differences. It is very easy for a lot of them to say we are at 100 per cent capacity, but when you look at it in reality it is not necessarily that.

What has stood us in good stead in this state is following Public Health advice. To go over that 75 per cent for venues that can cater for more than 250 people is the wearing of masks. It is something we were able to work with Public Health on, to give those larger venues some greater capability. We can go into that in more detail.

You mentioned what type of consultation we had? There was specific consultation. We call it a round table. We got theatre groups in to provide input. That was conducted by the department, so I can throw to Jacquie to provide more detail.

Ms ALLEN - We ran two consultative forums with representatives of performing arts venues and Public Health, both to talk through the Public Health restrictions and the kind of issues and pressures that the venues were trying to manage.

At the moment there is a new direction that allows theatres and cinemas to move to 75 per cent of capacity. It is by approval of the Director of Public Health. They need to submit a plan for how they will manage that. There is still a requirement that the audience capacity remains within one person per two square metres. If the venue, in moving to a 75 per cent capacity, will compromise the one in two square metres rule, then there is a requirement that everyone who is front-of-house needs to wear a mask. Equally, there are other management strategies that the venues are working on with Public Health which might involve staged entry and exit to the venues and looking at moving people through bars differently.

Ms ARCHER - A lot of challenges with venues in this state is that they are pretty old, historic, which are beautiful but have the added difficulty that the seating is very close together. That is what has caused the issues with a lot of them. Front-of-house can also be very confined.

Mr WILLIE - Another element to this discussion is insurance and not being able to get insurance because of COVID-19 reasons. Has the Government looked at that space and what it can do there to provide some further comfort for people taking on events?

Ms ARCHER - The specific issues that have arisen haven't so much centred around insurance as centred around the certainty for planning these events. The \$10 000 to \$100 000 can be used for that purpose as well. It's taking on that risk, should the framework change or there's a COVID-19 outbreak and the event needs to be cancelled, that they have some certainty for they know they will receive a certain amount and it will cover things like insurance and other box office costs. It gives them that certainty.

CHAIR - I want to go the cancelled events. Is there any cost on what would have been incurred as a result of all the cancelled events as a result of COVID-19? We must have some

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idea, because it would be well-planned as to the events that we would have been involved in and putting in place during this period.

Ms ARCHER - Do you mean money that we would've already given organisations but they didn't need it?

CHAIR - That is one.

Ms ARCHER - I think we've just rolled it over, haven't we, Jacquie?

Ms ALLEN - Yes, we haven't asked for it back.

Mr O'BYRNE - Have you reallocated it?

Ms ALLEN - In most instances, it is a case-by-case basis. I'll try to maintain the separation between at the events portfolio and the arts portfolio. Within the arts portfolio, we have mostly ongoing contracts with organisations, and when we have those contracts we haven't sought to recover that funding. We've sought to work with the organisations to help them shift their activity to other forms.

As the minister said, the other thing we did last year was recognising that for many organisations the idea of developing a business plan in August of last year for a funding application for this year was not really possible because we didn't know, at that stage, what things would look like.

There was the roll over of the funding. We haven't sought to claw back that funding. What we have done is renegotiated with organisations and funding recipients on their delivery date where that's possible, and so pushed activities further out.

CHAIR - What would be the quantum of that funding if you haven't seen fit to draw back?

Ms ALLEN - I could not put a number on it for you today.

CHAIR - Can you take it on notice?

Ms ARCHER - The amount we rolled over was \$1.65 million.

Ms ALLEN - Yes, \$1.65 million was rolled over in contracts.

Ms ARCHER - That was just arts organisations.

CHAIR - Do you need to take the question on notice, minister?

Ms ARCHER - Can we answer that?

Ms ALLEN - I'm not sure we can provide much more detail than the quantum amount of the funding that we rolled over.

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CHAIR - I would have thought that you could have advised us on the amount that you're not wishing to withdraw. That's what you referred to. You're not wishing to withdraw that funding, you said. Surely you must be able to tell us what amount that funding was, if you're not wishing to withdraw it.

Ms ALLEN - We spend approximately \$2.3 million a year in funding to arts organisations. That is usually for an annual program of events or over a three-year period. A lot of organisations have costs that are spread across the whole year, and not on an event by event basis. That is why we have adopted the approach of working with the organisations and pushing it out. It's a difficult exercise. I would be happy to see if we can do it; but because we have an annual funding relationship with organisations and there are component parts of our program, it might prove difficult to put a number on.

Mr O'BYRNE - Surely, in terms of accounting, you'd know where the money goes, every dollar?

Ms ALLEN - We know exactly where the money goes.

Mr O'BYRNE - Exactly. I think the question from the Chair is pretty clear about which funding functions did you roll over?

Ms ALLEN - I think the minister's answered that in terms of the \$1.65 million that was rolled over.

Mr O'BYRNE - How much money was reallocated? There are funding arrangements where organisations, either touring or others, did not come or did not perform; was there any funding that was either returned or not distributed and then reallocated amongst the portfolio?

Mr EVANS - That's probably better answered in the events space rather than the arts space. We're probably best to take that one on notice.

Mr O'BYRNE - If I can go back to the numbers and the audience restrictions, there's been a fair bit of criticism from the industry in terms of what they perceive as inconsistencies not only between states; and you have a lot of really good people who know the business so well - such as John X. They're highly critical of what they see as inconsistencies between states and inconsistencies between activities like sporting activities as an example.

What do you say to that section of the industry when they perceive - or no, it's not a perception: they believe strongly that the restrictions on them are harder than sporting activities, and particularly other states that have had much larger outbreaks and much harder lockdowns. For example, Victoria coming out of their second hard lockdown went very quickly to restrictions that were more relaxed than Tasmania.

Ms ARCHER - I can assure you that when we receive Public Health advice we delve into the detail and try to get an understanding. When I say we, I mean Cabinet, in relation to why it is and why it might be different. You have used the example of sporting venues so if it's an outdoor venue I think it speaks for itself. It's pretty obvious that there's less risk -

Mr O'BYRNE - There's indoor venues as well.

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Ms ARCHER - I will get to that. Outdoor venues - there's less risk. You're not in a confined space. Indoor venues - a lot of the stadiums have a high capability or the seating is such that you can move it, or if you can't move it the spacing is quite different to a theatre for example. I've touched on that earlier with many a heritage or smaller theatre venue.

The way it's been described to me as well, and I know - and you will too - from attending a theatre venue, it is a very closed environment. It can be that the person next to you is sitting very close and so you would be breaching the 10 metre square rule unless of course it is a family member. And so, there is that distinct consistency- not inconsistency - in that regard.

Having said that, that is why we have really explored the full extent of what we can do so that we can get as high a portion of a venue used as possible, and that's where Jacquie explained the wearing of masks. We managed to work with Public Health on allowing a situation where if a venue is over 250, they can have an outcome where if everybody is wearing a mask then we can have more in the venue. Largely that has been well received.

I take your point with using a specific example of a much larger production. The larger the production of course the greater risk there is, because you need more people on stage and they can't socially distance then. The example you've used with John X - I really feel for John. I know him personally and meet with him regularly in relation to the *Rocky Horror Show*. It's a big cast.

The live performances that have been able to get back even during COVID-19, like *The Bleeding Tree*, smaller cast; they can socially distance. They actually designed the set with that in mind. Those events and performances are able to return with greater certainty than those larger types of performances.

I don't know, Jacquie, if you have anything to add to that. You've been involved in meetings with the broader theatre community, with a whole range of different participants as well in terms of their satisfaction with consistencies.

Ms ALLEN - We are aware there is a perception that the restrictions in Tasmania are different from other jurisdictions. To the best of our knowledge they are not. When we're looking at indoor gatherings they're operating under the density rule of one person per 2 square metres which is consistent.

Ms ARCHER - That is consistent across jurisdictions, isn't it?

Ms ALLEN - Correct. From what we can tell different jurisdictions are operating between 60 per cent and 75 per cent capacity of a seated venue. There are obviously different risks, as the minister said, as to whether the event is indoors or outdoors, whether seating is fixed or people are free moving, and then looking at the density.

Ms ARCHER - Can I just say Northern Territory is the only one that's different with physical distancing of 1.5 square metres instead of 2 square metres. The rest are all 2 square metres.

Mr WILLIE - Just on this, minister, the risk profile would be decreasing by the day because of the vaccination rollout?

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Ms ARCHER - We don't have any certainty in relation to that as yet, other than there are fewer deaths in the UK.

Mr WILLIE - Hotel quarantine is the weak point and if you have workers in hotel quarantine being vaccinated, you would think they would not be going to be contracting the virus and then spreading it in the community. Have you been talking to Public Health about these restrictions and, can we expect them to be lifted soon, as the risk profile decreases with the vaccination program?

Ms ARCHER - We will very much always be guided on what Public Health says and I will be most interested to find out how the vaccine does impact. Because we have only started rolling it out, even Public Health would say it is too early to say what type of things we can do with the success or otherwise of the vaccine program. Only having it operating for a couple of weeks, it is such a shame that we cannot start lifting restrictions all of a sudden; but if the evidence tells us we can, and Public Health tells us we can, we will act accordingly.

Mr O'BYRNE - One of the frustrations we are hearing, it's partly events but in the arts community as well, is their lack of ability to have a conversation directly with Public Health to get an understanding of why certain restrictions are put in place. There have been some forums hosted by departmental officials, but it is almost like they are talking to the middle person as opposed to the people who make the final decision.

Their frustration is that restrictions are put in place which, from a health perspective may seem reasonable and workable, but are completely unworkable in the arts and events space. The arts and events people say, if they had an opportunity to talk directly to those people making those decisions, they believe they would have a greater opportunity to explain how to mitigate risk and manage the environment.

Ms ARCHER - I can understand their frustration, but I can also assure the same community that I am familiar with the issues in the arts community and we are relaying that information direct to Public Health -

Mr O'BYRNE - With respect, minister, you know what it is like. We are not experts in these things. If politicians and people who are not intimately involved in either the basis of a reason why you put in a restriction, and the people who actually run the events, because it is the tip of the iceberg sort of principle, surely that would make sense to get those people together?

Ms ARCHER - I have made myself available to anyone who wants an appointment.

Mr O'BYRNE - But it is not about you, minister.

Ms ARCHER - With the greatest respect, they can tell me and I will raise that directly with Public Health and relay it faithfully, as accurately as they tell me.

Mr O'BYRNE - But it is context, though. It may be that certain circumstances -

Ms ARCHER - We are not dealing with such a highly specialised area that I cannot relay that information to Public Health.

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Mr O'BYRNE - So, events isn't a highly specialised area, and the arts practice?

Ms ARCHER - No, I mean it is not that highly specialised that I cannot relay information that is told to me by the sector. That is what I am saying. Where is it getting lost in translation?

CHAIR - One at a time, for *Hansard*.

Ms ARCHER - How does Mr O'Byrne think that this is being lost in translation?

Mr O'BYRNE - With the greatest respect, you do not make the health restrictions and you do not run events. Having those two people in the room to have a conversation to get a greater awareness and understanding. Their criticism is, that they are the people in the middle. They feel, in their frustration, it would be better for them - and it may be that only a margin changes - but they have said constantly over the last six to nine months, in events and arts, that they want to have that conversation. They want a greater awareness and a greater capacity to provide plans and feedback on plans they make, because so many events have been cancelled.

Ms ARCHER - I understand.

Ms ALLEN - I can respond in part to that. Under the events framework, level 3 events are approved by the Director of Public Health. That involves some conversation and work between Public Health officials and the event organisers, to understand what their plans are and work with them to come up with a plan that is going to be successful.

With regard to the restrictions, the parameters around one person per 2 square metres and things like that are consistent across all industries. We are absolutely aware of the financial impact that has for event organisers, and in particular for performing arts event organisers, who are affected by this. That is why we have facilitated a couple of roundtables where there were industry representatives and senior representatives from Public Health around the table talking about those issues.

In relation to some of the producers, John X for example, there have been specific meetings between Public Health officials and themselves.

Ms ARCHER - I don't know where you've heard that I haven't had access to public officials.

Mr WILLIE - We are still getting these inconsistencies.

Ms ARCHER - I am very happy to organise Public Health to attend these things.

Mr WILLIE - I can give you an example. I wrote to the Education minister about it. It is the practical application of these things. Pantomimes for kids at the end of last year. There were organisations that put those shows on for schools. They weren't able to do it because social distancing rules applied in the theatre, even though the kids in the school grounds were mingling as they normally would. To get on a bus and then go to a theatre was a completely different set of circumstances.

Ms ARCHER - I'm not denying that. That was Department of Education.

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Mr WILLIE - They could be playing footy with each other in the schoolyard at lunchtime but they couldn't sit in the theatre next to each other to watch pantomime. That's the practical application that we're talking about.

Mr O'BYRNE - Did you raise that with the Education minister?

Mr WILLIE - I did.

Mr O'BYRNE - That impacts the arts community.

Ms ARCHER - No pantomime producer came to us with that.

Mr WILLIE - I put someone in contact with Public Health about that issue.

Ms ARCHER - I'm talking about me, personally. Nobody raised that with me, personally. Had they raised with me, personally, yes, I would have taken it to Public Health. I meet with Public Health once a week.

Mr O'BYRNE - The arts community is an ecosystem and they rely on and feed off a whole range of other artistic ventures and events. There's growing concern about the future funding for Ten Days on The Island, for Dark MOFO, and other such events. What clarity can you give the arts community that there's ongoing support and funding for those major events, which are pretty important to the arts community?

Ms ARCHER - It's the first time I've heard of there being a concern from Ten Days on The Island. We've been very supportive -

Mr O'BYRNE - To clarify, I'm not saying I'm representing Ten Days. I'm saying there's growing concern around the future funding for major events.

Ms ARCHER - Dark MOFO is the Events portfolio, which is not mine. I can speak for the example of Ten Days on The Island. The usual budget process applies in relation to how we roll out our government funding for all of these events. I don't think there's cause for concern for any of these organisations in how they would normally apply.

In the post-COVID-19 environment I can't see that changing other than how they conduct it in terms of performances because of COVID-19. I'm not quite sure where you're coming from, where people feel that their funding won't be renewed. There's never been any indication of that.

CHAIR - In regard to time, do you have a quick question to satisfy yourselves?

Ms ARCHER - I don't want there to be a rumour put out by the Opposition today. Let me make it clear: the usual process of clients in relation to our budget process, I can't see that that changes in any way.

Mr O'BYRNE - Do you know when you'll be making a decision about the renewal of those events?

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Ms ARCHER - When they are up for renewal. We have a budget listed for August this year. I'm not sure why you're asking this question. There's no deviation of it. They haven't raised it with me, Mr O'Byrne. I think you're being an alarmist.

Mr O'BYRNE - I'll pass that on to the people who raised it with me.

Ms ARCHER - I'd love to know who they are because it certainly hasn't been raised with me.

CHAIR - One last question. Where are we now in this industry? How long will it take us to get back?

Ms ARCHER - I'm very keen for things to progress back to some sort of sense of normality as quickly as possible, which is why we've put the additional funding so there can be certainty for live performances, for example. That was specifically designed so that people would take on the risk of planning an event or a performance rather than thinking, 'Oh, it's too much of a risk because of COVID-19, we just won't do that for another 12 months'.

We're doing everything within our power to maintain that positive message. We don't want to see things cancelled. We want things to proceed. That's the reason why we've provided additional stimulus funding, specifically in that live performance area of the arts. People can plan those events with greater certainty that should happen, they have access to an amount of funding that is pre-approved and they know they have that.

CHAIR - Thank you very much, minister. Thank you, Jacquie and Kim. We appreciate the extra time that we have had.

THE WITNESSES WITHDREW.

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Hon JANE HOWLETT, MP, MINISTER FOR RACING WAS CALLED AND WAS EXAMINED.

Mr PAUL ERIKSSON, CEO TASRACING, and **Mr TONY LATHAM**, OFFICE OF RACING INTEGRITY, WERE CALLED, MADE THE STATUTORY DECLARATION AND WERE EXAMINED.

CHAIR (Mr Dean) - Some introductions first of all. Thank you, minister, for your attendance here today. I will introduce my team first of all: we have Nic Street at the end, when Nic returns; he will be here shortly. John Tucker, myself, David O'Byrne and Josh Willie. Ruth Forrest is an apology today.

At the back we have Nat Exel, our secretary and our assistant secretary, Ali Waddington, and Gaye Mitchell from Hansard.

This is a public session. It is being broadcast and you are aware of that.

Minister I will get you, at this stage, to introduce your side.

Ms HOWLETT -To my right I have Mr Paul Eriksson, CEO, Tasracing, and Mr Tony Latham, Office of Racing Integrity. Behind me I have Chief of Staff, Richard Wilson, and David Manshanden, Adviser for Racing.

Mr DEAN - Thank for that. For this session we have 2.15 to 3.15 p.m. Then we follow on, after a short break to your other area of responsibility, Minister for Sport and Recreation.

Before we commence, this is a public session. It is being broadcast. It is being recorded into *Hansard* in due course. While you are giving evidence in this Committee, Parliamentary Privilege applies. Once you leave this Committee, not quite knowing what the situation is, so you need to be really careful what you say, and that Privilege certainly doesn't apply in here.

Ms HOWLETT - Would you like me to make an Opening Statement.

CHAIR - It is up to you. If you have a statement there to make, minister.

Ms HOWLETT - From 2 March when the first COVID-19 positive was identified in Tasmania, Tasracing established practices and controls in line with, and in some cases, in advance of mainland states, to minimise the risk of community infection. This was a particularly challenging time for everyone, and the industry worked very hard to abide by the significant restrictions that were necessary to mitigate the risk of infection. However, risk remained.

Following the advice from Public Health, the Government announced the cessation of racing on Thursday, 2 April, with immediate effect. This decision to cease racing was based on advice to reduce interregional travel in order to lower the risk of the contagion.

Tasracing worked with the Racing Industry to develop a support package that would develop two objectives. The first was to manage the welfare issue that would arise should racing animals be spelled, and also to incentivise keeping these animals in work, in order that

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they could resume racing once the crisis had passed. The second objective was to keep participants in the industry. I am pleased to say that both these objectives were achieved. Trainers were incentivised to continue animals in work, rather than send them to agistment.

The \$2 million per month support package developed by the Government was set at a level that was broadly equivalent to continuing the full value of the stakes money and other code funding continuing to be invested in the industry over the duration of the shutdown. The support package was funded through Tasracing with additional assistance as required through a government loan.

Chair, our support package has worked. Racing resumed in mid-June after 72 days shutdown with strong fields and healthy nominations across all codes, which demonstrated that the support package was effective in directing support to trainers from their working animals. The support package was developed through close consultation with the industry and was about the most effective form of support and the plan was very well executed. I know Mr Latham will talk later on about the support package and how he had the opportunity to go around and see participants as well.

I thank my fellow shareholder minister and Treasurer and the board and management of Tasracing for the roles they played in designing the support package. I also thank the Office of Racing Integrity for the role it played in maintaining the integrity of the support arrangements through the shutdown.

Confidence is high in the industry now with record results achieved at the 2021 Magic Million Sales. The average price was up at the 2021 Tasmanian Harness Sales as well and we have also had two 6 per cent stakes increases since the COVID-19 shutdown.

A big reason for those excellent sales results is that the stakemoney across the industry has now increased by 19 per cent since early 2018. This has already exceeded the Government's commitment in the March 2018 election to increase stakes by an average of 4 per cent a year over the period of the Government. This has been achieved during a period where confidence in the industry has been challenged. I've never seen another time that the industry has faced the challenges that it's had.

The increase in stakes has been possible because of the strength with which the industry has bounced back. Confidence in and interest in the Tasmanian racing product has been excellent since racing returned which is demonstrated by very strong race field fees in the first half of the financial year. Returns from the point of consumption tax have been tracking exceptionally well ahead of Treasury's expectations.

While I don't want to take anything for granted I'm very optimistic that the industry is in a positive trajectory and will continue for the next few years.

Thank you.

CHAIR - Thank you, minister.

Mr O'BYRNE - Thank you, minister. We all share the hope that the industry can recover from what's been a pretty tough year.

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I want to go back to the decision-making processes around the time of the shutdown. The Tasmanian industry was the only racing industry that was shut down. Even during the hardest of lockdown and community transmission in Victoria, the Victorian racing industry and New South Wales and other states, apart from an odd meet here or there, all the mainland racing industries continued and the meets continued to be held with restrictions.

I want to go back to - because we still need to be aware that a case could occur in Tasmania and a response would be required - could you explain and go through the decision-making process for the shutdown? At what point were you notified and just around that decision on the 2 April? Could you inform of us meetings and discussions that took place, please, and how that decision was made?

Ms HOWLETT - I thank Mr O'Byrne for his question. We've been over this before in Estimates - the shutdown.

CHAIR - I want to make it perfectly clear that this is a separate hearing. It is nothing to do with Estimates so any questions that come up or were asked in Estimates so be it. These are the questions we'll be asking you today so if you could please answer those questions or take them on notice if you feel comfortable that way, or get the person either side of you to answer them. Please let's move forward rather than hark back on what's happened.

Ms HOWLETT - I was notified on 2 April; that morning - I couldn't tell you exactly what time it was now. It was certainly in the morning, around perhaps 9 o'clock, that Public Health had made the decision to cease racing. I then contacted the CEO of Tasracing, Mr Eriksson.

Mr O'BYRNE - In your intro, you referred to Tasmania having a higher level of restrictions and COVID management practices than some other jurisdictions. What discussions were had with Public Health prior to that decision, or the phone call that was made on 2 April?

Ms HOWLETT - Mr Eriksson and Tasracing had already put specific protocols in place prior to that.

Mr O'BYRNE - I understand the protocols; we don't need to traverse those. I want to understand the decision-making process. Clearly you put in some restrictions under advice. We just need to understand what discussions were had with Public Health around that.

Ms HOWLETT - We were in a situation that we had never faced before, as we are all aware -

Mr O'BYRNE - And most other states were in the same boat.

Ms HOWLETT - Yes. We had a situation on the north-west coast with an outbreak there as well. We know that the population in racing across all three codes is a lot higher than average in other states and jurisdictions, and we needed to make sure they were protected. We wanted to act straightaway. Going back almost 12 months, the most important thing was the safety and wellbeing of all Tasmanians.

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Mr O'BYRNE - I'm not disputing that. This committee has been tasked with looking at the impact of COVID-19 -

Ms HOWLETT - Yes.

Mr O'BYRNE - Apart from the hospitality industry, the racing industry was the most impacted -

Ms HOWLETT - Absolutely.

Mr O'BYRNE - I think it's more than legitimate to ask questions about how that decision was made.

Ms HOWLETT - The decision was made by Public Health.

Mr O'BYRNE - Okay. What discussions did Tasracing, and you, as minister, have with Public Health in the lead-up to 2 April?

Ms HOWLETT - I didn't have any discussions with Public Health as far as racing before 2 April.

Mr O'BYRNE - So you had no discussions with Public Health?

Ms HOWLETT - No. The decision was made on 2 April that racing would cease.

Mr O'BYRNE - What information was provided from the racing industry and you, as minister, to Public Health to inform that decision?

Ms HOWLETT - I received a phone call. I'm not going to discuss what the conversation was in that phone call, but Public Health had made the decision. I believe they made the correct decision that day that racing would cease, in order to protect the people of Tasmania, including the people in the racing industry and with what was occurring on the north-west coast of Tasmania.

Mr O'BYRNE - So, Public Health informed you directly?

Ms HOWLETT - No. Public Health didn't inform me directly on that day.

Mr O'BYRNE - Okay.

Ms HOWLETT - Yes.

Mr O'BYRNE - Were there any discussions between the Tasracing industry directly with Public Health around the restrictions they had put in place that led to that decision?

Ms HOWLETT - Paul, would you like to answer that?

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Mr ERIKSSON - We did not talk directly to Health. What we did do, though, was provide information - and you will have to excuse me because I don't know the correct word - it was the -

Mr O'BYRNE - The State Controller.

Mr ERIKSSON - - State Controller, Health, and the Premier's office so they were aware of the controls that we put in place. I would need to go back and check the exact information, the exact dates, but that was fairly public information. However, there were no specific discussions between Health and Tasracing prior to being notified of that decision.

Mr O'BYRNE - Given the fact that Tasmania was the only place that was shut down, do you think conversations between the industry and Public Health to understand the restrictions - as the minister has said, in advance of being put in place in some other jurisdictions - do you think that would have been constructive and improved the process? It may not have changed the outcome, but do you think it would have been helpful if the industry had been able to sit down with Public Health officials to explain the restrictions you put in place, to get a different outcome?

Mr ERIKSSON - I am not sure I can adequately answer that question. I think the information that had been provided was very clear and very concise in the controls and our management of those controls. I'm not aware of the modelling that would have been done by health in terms of the risk or transmission of that disease. I could not speak to that at all. I really don't know how to provide an answer other than the information that was provided was clear, concise and effectively self-explanatory.

Mr O'BYRNE - There has been discussion particularly around a greyhound meet on the north-west and around the classification of that being either being a sporting event or an outdoor event. Some of the industry participants believe there was a decision made by Public Health on the basis of sport as opposed to an industry. For example, they looked at the restrictions that were put in place with Bunnings, and if you look at Elwick across the road in terms of social distancing, are there any reflections about that decision by Public Health, in terms of the category of event that was undertaken?

Mr ERIKSSON - I don't believe that decision was made by Public Health. My understanding is that decision was made through the office or area of the State Controller. It was referenced up through the police in the north-west - the regional command there - to the office of the State Controller.

In terms of that decision, I'm not privy to that. I have answered a very similar question when I appeared before the committee on 6 August on that and a question on notice. The outcome of that was very clear, that we did not see that issue as having an impact - and the meeting was on 31 March - on the closure of racing.

We had had the thoroughbred meeting at Launceston abandoned just a few days earlier, due to a jockey being in close proximity to another jockey in Victoria, who also had an exposure to COVID-19. That tested negative.

Again, I speak to the information, the racing industry clearly demonstrated that we were not prepared to take a risk when we, ourselves, closed that meeting at Launceston and we did

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not challenge the closure on 31 March either. We looked at it and, yes, it was a prudent, proactive decision and we had no problem with that.

We don't see either as impacting on the decision on 2 April.

Mr O'BYRNE - Given your statement just then, in terms of the work that you believe that you were doing, you must have been shocked when you heard the decision from the Government.

Mr ERIKSSON - Mr O'Byrne, I was very disappointed as was the industry, but the reality is it was an unprecedented situation and we were able to put in place a strong package that supported the industry. Again, that is borne out by how we've come out of it. The return to racing on 13 June was very strong. We had very strong fields, and we've continued to have strong racing all the way through.

Mr O'BYRNE - Going back, when were you notified of the decision by the Government?

Mr ERIKSSON - I was notified of that decision in the morning of 2 April, the day that it became effective.

Mr O'BYRNE - Given every other jurisdiction continued to race - it's in the public domain - a number of participants from the three codes worked very hard on a package of restrictions that could be presented to the Government. My understanding is you presented that to the Government. When did you present that?

Mr ERIKSSON - We put an initial return to racing package to the Government in late April/early May. We put a support package to the Government early in April.

Mr O'BYRNE - The funding is different. I want to talk about the restrictions in terms of the return to racing.

Mr ERIKSSON - From memory it would have been late April. I would need to confirm the exact date of that.

Mr O'BYRNE - With respect, given the work you'd done to put in the restrictions and the management of the COVID-19 risk during March, why did it take so long to present that to Government - when effectively, in your own words and the words of the minister, you had restrictions in advance of jurisdictions that continued to operate?

Mr ERIKSSON - There were two reasons for that, Mr O'Byrne. The first was we put that aside for the moment and focused on delivering the support package which we did quite quickly and that was a couple of weeks to deliver and that a significant amount of work to get the forms, to get the information process and get the initial payments out to the industry. The first payments, from memory, went about 17 April and we had Easter through there.

The second one was we then took those controls that we had in place for the unique meetings. We then had to determine a plan for regionalisation and had to determine how we would manage without the north-west coast because from recollection at that point of time the north-west coast was effectively well and truly locked down, so there were a number of other

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complicating factors that we needed to work through. We couldn't bring jockeys in. We had to look at how we would manage the meetings, how we would manage riders, how we would move dogs around; how we would control a whole range of issues; how we would ensure tracking.

There were a number of challenges that we had to get through and then we went through a reiterative process with Government to fine tune that until Health was comfortable that we had sufficient controls and sufficient rules and we were in a sufficiently safe place from a community perspective.

CHAIR - David, just one question because I need to go to John and a couple of others, and I will come back to you.

Mr O'BYRNE - You went back with a package - a management structure - that had been put together by the industry in late April/early May or give or take a day or two. Could you talk through the steps that were taken and the meetings that occurred over the next period to get to the final decision? Were there daily meetings?

Mr ERIKSSON - No, there were not daily meetings. In terms of discussion with industry, there were weekly meetings with industry to discuss where we were at, what changes we needed to make, and taking feedback through the controlling areas - through the State Controller and those bodies. We didn't talk directly to Health until a time in May that I cannot recall the exact date.

Mr O'BYRNE - Just one final question which rounds-up this line of questioning. Minister, obviously, Tasracing was in meetings - what actions did you take to advocate on behalf of the industry to get it restarted?

Ms HOWLETT - We had regular meetings in my office. We had the Office of Racing Integrity there; we had Paul, and Tasracing there, and we also had members from each different code. We worked each week to put forward strategies. Initially, it was explaining the package and then it was all about return to racing and putting those measures in place. I can't exactly remember what the date was that we met with Public Health to present them with our paper -

Mr ERIKSSON - I have a feeling it was the second week of May but I'd need to confirm that.

Mr O'BYRNE - Did you meet directly with Public Health, minister? That was the second week of May.

Ms HOWLETT - Yes, with Paul as well.

Mr O'BYRNE - Is that the first time you met with Public Health?

CHAIR - Directly on this issue?

Ms HOWLETT - Directly, yes, and then we met with them again. For me, my role during that time was to bring the codes together, work with Paul, work the Office of Racing Integrity, to have a structure and a plan in place so we could return as soon as Public Health deemed it possible to return.

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CHAIR - Thank you, David. I need to go elsewhere and then I will come back.

Mr TUCKER - Minister, can you provide details of the number of racing animals that received support through the shutdown period by racing code, please?

Ms HOWLETT - By code?

Mr TUCKER - Yes.

Ms HOWLETT - I thank the member for his question. I note that you would have a lot of trainers in the electorate of Lyons as well.

The industry support package was set up with thoroughbreds, worth \$38 per day; \$35 for standard breeds, and \$50 per week for greyhounds.

On 8 May we announced the support package as well. As far as the number of applications, a total of 723 applications for support were received, requesting a total of just over \$4 million in assistance to support racing codes and clerks.

The number of trainers - we had 76 trainers in the thoroughbred code, and 898 horses. In the standardbred code, we had 111 trainers and the number of horses was 653. In the greyhound code, the number of trainers was 127 and it was 1200 greyhounds. Clerks, we have seven across Tasmania and we had two thoroughbreds, I believe - they had to keep those horses in work as well.

The Tasmanian Racing Industry's major sponsor, Ladbrokes, also made a contribution as well. They contributed \$150 000 as a bonus under the Ladbrokes Fast Start program to reward participants across all three codes when racing resumed.

The support package was successful as upon the return of racing we saw very strong fields across all three codes. We had to put on 12 additional harness races and 16 additional thoroughbred races needed to be programmed in July and August to cater for the demand. The greyhounds took a little bit longer to come back due to restrictions on trialling opportunities, but we were pleased that their fields were full as well by mid-July. Paul, did you have anything else you want to say?

Mr ERIKSSON - With the north-west coast, there was a two-week delay for when they came back to training, to trialling. With the thoroughbreds and the standardbreds it's much easier to get them up without access to a race track, whereas with the greyhounds you need to get them on the track to do their fitness. Having them gallop up a straight track, which is where the training facilities were, doesn't do what's needed to do and we didn't want the injuries, so they had a delay. It takes longer to get the greyhound back because of that.

If I may, going on a point Mr O'Byrne raised and to add some more, over the 10 weeks we had 22 000 individual transactions that we had to process and pay out. We didn't increase our staff, we didn't change our rules, we just worked away and processed 22 000 transactions. They all had to be processed manually because there were no systems feeding it in. That's very labour intensive. It goes also to the fact that we requested significant work from ORI across

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that time in helping us confirm and check that the animals were in work and that there were valid payments to be made.

When we talk about the time it took to deliver all of this, you need to factor in that there were no increases in staff. We managed where we were even though we were under pressure to reduce staff. What was delivered was exceptional in the time frame and we still delivered a return to racing.

Mr TUCKER - Through you, minister, to Paul, if the horses drop out of work for two or four weeks, how long does it take to bring that horse back? There's a time lag, isn't there?

Ms HOWLETT - There is. Across all three codes they're an athlete, basically, so as soon as you stop training and even at an elite level it does take time to rebuild that fitness again.

Mr O'BYRNE - In terms of the checks and balances you referred to, when you say, 'checks and balances', could you outline the procedure you took to ensure that the money went in the right category and the right trainer?

Mr ERIKSSON - We utilised the information that we had on account so all trainers had to make application. Those applications were verified by the Tasracing operations team and secondly by the Tasracing finance team so we had two separate teams overseeing the transactions. The transactions were calculated and checked. We had an audit team separate to that as well and if there was any concern we would challenge that through ORI to go and check the animals.

Ms HOWLETT - ORI did an incredible number of stable visits and kennel visits during that time as well.

Mr ERIKSSON - That's correct. In answer to your question, the checks and balances were the trainers had to apply. They had to continue to apply on a regular basis and to notify additions and subtractions - so horses that came into work, horses that came out of work. There are a number. They do that all the time in the normal course of training.

They were being checked by ORI out in the field and we were getting that independent check from ORI. We had a number of teams inside Tasracing that were checking it. Finance was looking at the actual validity of the payments; operations were checking that it was the right trainer and that horse was there, so they were checking with the information that was on the Racing Australia Single National System, the Harness Racing Australia HaRVey System, and the Greyhounds Australasia system, OzChase.

We were checking the correct ownership and location of the stable turn, the kennel turn of the animal; ORI was confirming it was well. We were then checking the actual payments and the rates against those and the number of days. There were a number of independent teams reviewing that.

Mr STREET - I want to go back to the actual initial decision to shut down the industry. I guess I'm looking for confirmation more than asking the question. I'm interested in the racing industry so when it was shut down and we were the only state that shut, I asked some questions.

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Is it true that one of Public Health's main concerns about the Tasracing industry is that there's a lot of travel between the three regions in Tasmania, the fact that we've got racing facilities in three regions and that there's a lot of cross travel between? In Victoria most horses that race on the metropolitan tracks in Melbourne, for example, are trained in metropolitan Melbourne, most of the horses that race in country Victoria are trained in country Victoria. Is that true?

Ms HOWLETT - It was certainly a major concern for Public Health that - that intrastate travel with people coming from the north-west coast and particularly with what was occurring on the north-west coast at that time.

Mr ERIKSSON - If I may add to that, the amount of travel - you have individuals travelling from small communities into centres and then going back to the small communities and my understanding is that that was a significant risk.

Not only do you have travel between the three regions but even within the region from small communities to large communities and back out, that they would normally not visit because they wouldn't go and do their shopping there, they wouldn't do their normal daily work, business there.

Mr STREET - Yes.

Mr ERIKSSON - It's that grouping together and then going back to the smaller communities is my understanding and that is an understanding, not a -

Mr O'BYRNE - But the issue is around maybe - it's on that question, though. It's on that question around -

Mr STREET - That's fine. It was something that was explained to me that I wanted on the committee record.

Mr O'BYRNE - Yes.

CHAIR - Thank you.

Mr O'BYRNE - There was still significant horse transport around the state - that didn't diminish, did it? Horses were moved between, say, Brunton in the south up to the north-west coast for training or for transport to Victoria or for sale or for agistment or training. That didn't stop, did it?

Ms HOWLETT - No, that's right.

Mr O'BYRNE - There was social distancing applied and owners and participants were heavily restricted on course, weren't they?

Mr ERIKSSON - If I may, minister, we didn't allow owners on course. We restricted it purely to essential personnel.

Mr O'BYRNE - Yes.

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Mr ERIKSSON - And that was it. That was very clear in our - but then it's the essential personnel - the trainers, the stablehands, the handlers of the greyhounds, they're the ones who are coming in and out of the region. I can't speak to the horse transport.

Mr O'BYRNE - In terms of the quantifiable risk - Nic has brought us back to this decision.

CHAIR - Yes, he has.

Mr O'BYRNE - People within the industry moved around the state. If they were - for example, horse transport, that wasn't stopped was it?

Ms HOWLETT - No, because any form of animal transportation had an exemption.

Mr O'BYRNE - So why was an exemption applied? This is not a hobby or a sport. This is people's jobs. So, there were exemptions provided to the building industry. There were exemptions provided to Bunnings staff, retail staff. There were social distancing requirements on courses, on tracks, that were far in advance of those in the retail sector or the building sector. Why was that then not applied and explained to Health around the restrictions you had put in place? What was the risk? You have minimised travel. You have minimised connection between people, on course, and in training facilities.

CHAIR - Let me say, the question has been asked, I think. What I would say here is, unless the answer is different, you have said that this was a decision made by the Director of Public Health, by Dr Veitch. If there is a decision made by them, then, it is a question we probably need to put to the Director of Public Health, moving forward.

Ms HOWLETT - Correct. Thank you, Chair. The decision was made by Public Health.

Mr O'BYRNE - Did you agree with that?

Ms HOWLETT - Whether I agreed with it or I disagreed with it, the decision was made by Public Health. I think they made the right decision. I mean, look at what we know now about the COVID-19 virus. We are 12 months down the track.

Mr O'BYRNE - Look at the experience the Victorian industry continued to -

Ms HOWLETT - Yes. As we spoke about before, they had isolated regions as well.

Mr O'BYRNE - So would people travel from Bendigo into Melbourne.

Ms HOWLETT - Mr O'Byrne, what would you have done if Public Health told you to close down racing that day? I back Public Health and the decision that they made. We had a very severe situation on the north-west coast. Unfortunately, we were the only jurisdiction to close down racing, apart from South Australia who had Public Health advice to close down racing, for I believe it was 12 days, when they had a -

CHAIR - I think you have answered the question, minister, if you like.

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Ms HOWLETT - What I can do now is make sure that the industry has bounced back, which I believe it has. Increase stakes, which we have. Regain confidence in the Tasmanian racing market, which we are doing. It was a tough, difficult period for the racing industry.

CHAIR - Thank you. I need to move to Josh.

Mr WILLIE - Minister, I know this has been covered in some other forums, but, just so the committee can use it, what was the total amount for the support package? Can you confirm that that was industry money? It wasn't additional money from government.

Ms HOWLETT - The total amount for the support package was \$4.2 -

Mr ERIKSSON - It was \$4.201 million.

Mr WILLIE - And it was from the budget of Tasracing?

Ms HOWLETT - Would you like to talk to that, Paul?

Mr ERIKSSON - Those funds were effectively the funds that would have been paid out in stakemoney over that period in time.

Mr WILLIE - In terms of the Government loan to Tasracing, what was the total amount, and what are the repayment terms?

Mr ERIKSSON - The loan facility was a \$10 million facility of which, on 28 June, Tasracing drew \$2 million to ensure there would be no liquidity issues. Going through the month of July, that amount has been repaid.

Mr WILLIE - It has been repaid in full?

Mr ERIKSSON - We repaid it around 27 of 28 December.

Mr WILLIE - In terms of some further context for the committee in its report, could you give us a dollar figure for its section of the economy, and also the number of jobs involved in the industry?

Ms HOWLETT - Indirectly, the number of people employed throughout the racing industry in Tasmania is over 5000. I have always stated 5500 people indirectly employed throughout the racing industry. A lot of those people are employed in regional and rural Tasmania as well.

Mr WILLIE - And the contribution to the economy?

Ms HOWLETT - The economic contribution to the Tasmanian economy is approximately over \$103 million per year.

Mr O'BYRNE - Other jurisdictions continued to race obviously, we've established that. There was a significant uplifting revenue for those states. Can you quantify the cost to the lost

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activity in the state? What was the average percentage increase in other states - because we obviously went backwards because we ceased?

Mr ERIKSSON - It is impossible to comment on that. The time that we did not race - which was April, May and the first two weeks of June - are generally our lowest turnover months. The increases that were seen in the other jurisdictions varied significantly.

Mr O'BYRNE - Could you give an example?

Mr ERIKSSON - Anywhere between 20 percent to 25 per cent up to 60 per cent to 70 per cent. I think one of the greyhound jurisdictions had a bit over 100 per cent.

Mr O'BYRNE - There was a significant uplift in revenue into the industry across the country that Tasmania missed out on. Would that be a fair thing to say?

Mr ERIKSSON - Without being able to quantify it, in general terms there was an uplift in revenue that we did not receive due to the fact that we were not racing. It's exceptionally difficult to quantify that.

Mr O'BYRNE - But it's fair enough to say that due to the decision to shutdown the industry in Tasmania, there was opportunity cost lost because we weren't able to undertake activities that would have captured that revenue. The shutdown didn't only cost the industry; there was an opportunity lost of the revenue that clearly was flowing through the industry across the country. Is that a fair thing to say? I'm not asking you to say 25 or 60 but as a principle you would say that's a double whammy, isn't it?

Mr ERIKSSON - Without racing for 10 weeks we did not earn race to a fee revenue so, therefore, without revenue coming in -

Mr O'BYRNE - There are two points. It's not only the loss of revenue for not undertaking activity - there's the loss of revenue that the other states received because of an increase in revenue to their industry, that we would have felt had we been undertaking activities. Correct?

Mr ERIKSSON - Mr O'Byrne, I fully understand that your questions make two points. The second point is unable to be quantified in any way, shape or form, and I think it is very accurate to say that because we did not race for 10 weeks we did not earn revenue. What that would be - whatever the increase may or may not have been that we would have received on our base on our normal fees - is unquantifiable. Did we miss an opportunity? Yes. What did that cost us? Who knows.

Mr O'BYRNE - It was a missed opportunity, and that's the point I'm trying to make.

Ms HOWLETT - Of course, it was a missed opportunity.

Mr ERIKSSON - Absolutely.

Ms HOWLETT - We had 72 days of no racing.

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CHAIR - I have a couple of questions that I wanted to ask.

The impact on the industry as a result of closing - have we now caught up on all of that, minister, and are we now in front of where we might have been had we continued racing, or are we still getting back to where we were in this industry?

Ms HOWLETT - There's no doubt that confidence certainly took a big hit during that time. I know Mr O'Byrne is active, like I am, within the racing participants. Confidence definitely took a major hit. It's been my job, as minister, since all that occurred to build confidence back within the racing industry. We've done that through two lots of stake increases - 6 per cent in August and then 6 per cent in February this year.

The Tasmanian-bred horses - what a record. We had an amazing Magic Millions sale here - bigger than last year - we were up.

CHAIR - My question is though - are we back where we might have been had we continued racing?

Ms HOWLETT - Without the shutdown?

CHAIR - Are you able to say that the number of horses back in racing, the number of events that we're now having - are we yet back to where we were prior to COVID-19?

Ms HOWLETT - I think the confidence is definitely back in the industry and in the Tasmanian product, itself. We've seen it through race field fees and the point of consumption tax. Our brand, our product is very good.

CHAIR - The physical number of horses we have now, are we back where we were and moving forward?

Mr ERIKSSON - Mr Dean, the racing population is strong. We have good fields. Certainly, there are ongoing challenges. They are ongoing challenges that the industry has in the normal course of events at different times of the year with filling fields, depending on the horses that are in and out of work, and the dogs, and the stage of their training and life cycle.

In terms of confidence, I highly concur with the minister. The industry is quite confident in many areas now. In terms of have we caught up? Not racing for 10 weeks - you'll never catch up the 10 weeks revenue that you missed - but where we are is far in advance. The industry has just seen two strong increases in stakes, delivering 19 per cent since the 2018 election promise, and we are looking at further increases in stakes. I'm quite happy to have that on the record.

CHAIR - As a result of what we've gone through with COVID-19 and the lack of racing, have we lost any trainers, any riders? Have they moved away from the state?

Ms HOWLETT - We lost a few when we had no racing here for 72 days, but they've all returned.

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Mr ERIKSSON - I was going to say Craig Newitt was the only one, but he went for other reasons.

CHAIR - We retained all the trainers and those involved in the industry, itself - the breeding of horses, the trainers, we haven't lost any of those? There was that threat during this process when racing was stood down that we would be losing trainers, we would be losing horses and so on. That's the reason I ask.

Ms HOWLETT - That was one of your statements, Mr O'Byrne.

CHAIR - Thank you for that. Had there been?

Ms HOWLETT - I am more than happy to talk about interstate investors purchasing here at Magic Millions sale.

Mr ERIKSSON - You're going to say exactly what I'm going to say.

Mr HOWLETT - Confidence in the Tasmanian brand is extremely high and that was evident -

Mr ERIKSSON - At the Magic Millions sale. Magic Millions had its highest ever sale - \$3.37 million.

Ms HOWLETT - Less stock.

Mr ERIKSSON - We did have 120 lots, 94 were sold. We had our highest clearance at 82 per cent. Nine of those were withdrawn and 20 handed in so if you do the math that way it works. The average price went from just on \$30 000 to just under \$36 000 and the median went from \$26 000 to \$29 000. This is the strongest sale ever. We're just about to renegotiate with Magic Millions for another period.

Mr HOWLETT - We had Hong Kong purchasers as well.

Mr ERIKSSON - That happened after the sale and that was a fantastic result.

Ms HOWLETT - No, there were Hong Kong purchasers at the site - at Launceston.

Mr STREET - Do you give any guarantees on quality at the sales?

Ms HOWLETT - Quality? What do you mean?

Mr STREET - I was hoping that there might be some sort of guarantee on rate of return for the amount that you outlay on a yearling.

Ms HOWLETT - If I had a filly, David would make sure that he had the vet check done, scopes done and x-rays done before he purchased it.

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CHAIR - My question is, again, we've lost no investors to the state, we've lost no trainers to the state, and we've lost no other horse or dog business in the state as a result of the close down?

Ms HOWLETT - That is very hard to make a definite statement on, Mr Dean. What I certainly do know is that Denise Martin, for example, from Star Thoroughbreds, arrived in Launceston prior to the sales. She purchased - don't quote me - five or six horses, over \$50 000 each, and had 12 people with her to come and share the Tasmanian experience for quite a few days. People are making an event of bringing people here, to purchase a horse, and showcase what Tasmania is all about. They can quite easily meet the trainers as well. We've had a very positive vibe from interstate purchasers.

CHAIR - I'm not making much progress there. I will go back to Mr O'Byrne.

Ms HOWLETT - Mr O'Byrne would be able to agree with that.

Mr O'BYRNE - Obviously, the impact of COVID-19 was not restricted purely to the shutdown. The Monteith Report which was released yesterday was very damning, in terms of the management of tracks in Tasmania and the governance. That's a pretty significant report, minister. It's a very damning report about the management of our tracks and governance in Tasmania. What do you say to that?

Ms HOWLETT - What I can say, Mr O'Byrne, is that on 27 December I was extremely disappointed at what occurred at the Elwick track - and so were many trainers, owners, jockeys. Talking about interstate investors, a significant number of owners had flown in to watch their horses race that day.

Mr O'BYRNE - Also the Mowbray cancellation only a month before.

Ms HOWLETT - That's correct.

CHAIR - I need to be careful here to ensure that we are within our terms of reference. I'm not sure -

Ms HOWLETT - I will just answer very quickly.

Mr O'BYRNE - The Monteith Report talks about the resumption after COVID-19, and some of the decisions that were made due to the COVID-19 shutdown in terms of training and the use of the track. It's inherently connected to the post-COVID-19 startup and the management of that, which is of direct significance of the decision by the Government to close the industry down. That had a massive impact on the tracks.

CHAIR - I'll let it proceed at this stage, as long as we know how far we're going to go into it. I need to restrict to our terms and I wanted to ask a couple of questions as well.

Ms HOWLETT - As I mentioned to you before, I was extremely shocked and disappointed, as was the industry, in what occurred on 27 December and also what occurred at Mowbray before.

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Mr WILLIE - You can't disassociate from it. You're the minister and you're responsible.

Ms HOWLETT - What did I do, Mr Willie? I acted straightaway, and appointed Mr Dale Monteith to do a proper, thorough investigation of what happened, why it happened, to make sure that it can't happen again - and it can't happen again.

Mr O'BYRNE - One of the references in the report talks about industry feedback and industry's ability to be heard.

Ms HOWLETT - Yes.

Mr O'BYRNE - It was not just on 27th December that they were raising concerns; there's an indication prior to the shutdown. Clearly, from the resumption of training, trials and racing, there was significant industry feedback to Tasracing about some of the decisions being made and about the track maintenance; so, it wasn't until 27 December. You would have been aware of this. We all were aware of this kind of feedback. What did you do, minister, in the lead-up to the crunch point, the crisis point, when that feedback was being brought from the industry?

Ms HOWLETT - I guess there's different levels of feedback that I'm sure you've received - as I have.

Mr O'BYRNE - Absolutely.

Ms HOWLETT - I don't think there was any great feedback about the track at that particular stage - only Mowbray. We really didn't have an issue with the track until 27 December. We know it's a new track. We know all StrathAyr tracks take time to settle down and consolidate. One thing this report has outlined is that maintenance was not being correctly done. They were treating the track like it was the old track and they hadn't adapted policies and procedures for the new track. There are 29 different recommendations in this report.

Mr O'BYRNE - Yes, I can understand that, yes, and -

Ms HOWLETT - I've got to put on record my thanks to Mr Dale Monteith -

Mr O'BYRNE - Yes, very good.

Ms HOWLETT - - for being available to do that report. Let's remember it was 27 December. Usually most people would be away, and to get a phone call from me a couple of days later, asking him if I could engage him to do this. An enormous amount of work has gone into this.

I know you've read it. He's interviewed 33 different people throughout the state and in the industry. This is a serious report.

Elwick Track is the biggest asset to racing in southern Tasmania, and we have to get it right.

Mr O'BYRNE - Minister, the report talks about governance and decision making, from the CEO of Tasracing down internally to the board and to the Office of Racing Integrity (ORI).

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These are structural issues with industry that I know been raised with you and previous ministers. It seems to me there's a series of decisions been made, that industry people have flagged, that the Government has not responded to. What do you say to that, because you can get a Monteith Report -

Mr STREET - A point of order, Chair, if these are structural issues that existed before the pandemic I'm not sure they're relevant to this committee's hearing right now.

CHAIR - Thank you for that comment. I did make the comment before - we need to be careful how far we go in to this report because that is probably another issue. As long as we can stringently stick to the terms of reference - and the terms of reference are clear. We need to narrow it right down.

Mr O'BYRNE - After the shutdown resumption, there's a section of the report which talks about the 300 horses and the work that was put on, particularly to the Elwick track, and inherent in that is the decision-making. Are you comfortable with the chain of command and the decision-making process that was undertaken at that time, which was exacerbated by COVID-19, and that it won't have any ongoing impact?

Ms HOWLETT - Which bit are you referring to in the report? Are you referring to the trials or the jump outs? I'm not quite sure which bit you're referring to.

Mr O'BYRNE - The work that was put on to the track - whose decision it was that allowed that; the role of the board, for example which is flagged in the report. Are you comfortable with the decision making?

Ms HOWLETT - I will let the CEO, Mr Eriksson, answer that.

Mr O'BYRNE - Minister, you are the governance. You run the industry, effectively, in terms of the structure of the industry. Mr Eriksson, with respect, implements the governance, effectively the regulations through the board, of course. Are you comfortable with that decision-making process?

Ms HOWLETT - I am not involved in the day-to-day operations of Tasracing.

CHAIR - Order, you have asked the question; I think it is for the minister to direct it. If she doesn't want to answer the question, then she has that right to direct it. I will leave it to you, minister. I don't think our member should be telling you who should be answering the question.

Ms HOWLETT - Thank you, Chair. Paul, would you like to answer that question on my behalf?

Mr ERIKSSON - Certainly, thank you, minister.

The decision to allow the use of the track at that particular point of time - between 18 May and 21 June, which was a five-week period - was a decision that I made following consultation with StrathAyr, the track managers, an inspection of the track after the first gallop on it, and

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discussion with a number of people in the industry. Unfortunately, it was a lose-lose situation whichever way you want to look at it.

You can train a thoroughbred to a certain point but the last 10 per cent to 15 per cent of the animal's fitness has to be done with hard work, trials, jump-outs, and gallops on the surface they're going to race on. So, whilst we had the animals in work that gets you to 80 per cent to 90 per cent of the fitness. If we didn't allow them back on the track and they came back to racing, there was a risk that they would not be fit enough and there could potentially be a welfare issue. I will say that - potentially.

You're talking about an animal that is a high-performance athlete; they are trained; they will go hard. They love to race, they love to go fast. If they're not at 100 per cent peak fitness, the risk of injury increases - so we had a quandary. What could the track cope with, versus the health of the industry going forward.

Mr O'BYRNE - So will you make any different decisions?

Mr ERIKSSON - The only different decision I would make would be the decision we made in December when we employed a dedicated turf manager. I would have made that decision earlier.

CHAIR - We need to move on from there. I wanted to ask of ORI, in relation to the Office of Racing Integrity, as to the full impact of the COVID-19 and the shutdown on that office and where it is progressing. I thought Mr King would have been here today, but he is not.

Ms HOWLETT - Mr King is in a role with DPIPWE, so he is working with Parks at the moment.

CHAIR - What is happening in that office, as a result of this? How were the personnel in that office, I guess, retained during the COVID-19 period? Did we lose any from that office? What is the position within that office right now?

Ms HOWLETT - That is a really good question, Chair, and I believe you will be able to take care of that Mr Latham.

Mr LATHAM - Chair, a very good question. We were very busy during COVID-19 when the racing was shut down. The office's initial concerns were the animal welfare and the industry's participants' welfare. I am delighted and thankful that the Government and Tasracing brought in the Animal Welfare Package, or the package for the trainers and for the animals.

We initially sent the stewards out to do property inspections, initially focusing on speaking to the trainers, making sure they had enough food. Making sure the animals were okay. Seeing if they were okay. During that period, we did 127 greyhound inspections, as in properties. We did 136 thoroughbred property inspections, and we did 87 harness property inspections.

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When the welfare package came out by Tasracing, we were supplied horses that we wanted to check to make sure that they were in work. We checked on 45 thoroughbred horses and 229 standard bred horses during that time.

The stewards had indicated what to look for, for the horses, to make sure they were in work. The horse would have to be shod, the horse's hooves trimmed. The body condition, good muscle tone. They were rugged and had a healthy coat. The stewards observed them training on the property, looked through the work books, looked through treatment logbooks. So, all these indicators. It was of the opinion of the stewards to make sure that the horses were in work, and then we reported that back to Tasracing.

It was a busy time for us, and that was the steward's area. They were out every day, weekends, weekdays, every day of the week, doing inspections.

The operations team, and the admin team, were still working, most from home. However, we were still processing licences, registrations, transfers. All the racing admin work was still getting done.

CHAIR - Thank you for that. We are out of time, and we do need a short break. Members do. Minister, for this area of your portfolio, thank you very much. Thank you to both our members present at the table for asking the questions. We appreciate it very much.

Were there any matters taken on notice?

Ms HOWLETT - No, I don't believe so.

CHAIR - No, not this time. It was last time. Thank you very much for that, and we will have now a short break, and we will come back to the Sport and Recreation side of things.

Ms HOWLETT - Thank you, Chair, and thank you Paul Eriksson, and Tony Latham for being here.

THE WITNESSES WITHDREW.

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Ms KATE KENT, DEPUTY SECRETARY, DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNITIES, SPORT AND RECREATION, AND **Ms HELEN LANGENBERG**, MANAGER SPORT AND RECREATION, DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNITIES SPORT AND RECREATION, WERE CALLED, MADE THE STATUTORY DECLARATION AND WERE EXAMINED.

CHAIR - I think Kate and Helen are pretty well known to everybody here today. I think we can skip some of those introductions.

Minister, having said that, I don't need to explain, you all understand that privileges apply in these committees and you understand the system. You have both given evidence before these committees many times, that I am aware. I don't think I need to go into that. I ask that the two members to take the declaration before them.

Minister, the same as on the last occasion with your last area of responsibility, an opportunity to an opening address if you want to go down that path and then we can follow that up with some questions from there. I will leave that to you.

Ms HOWLETT - Thank you, Chair. The health, safety and wellbeing of Tasmanians is the Government's highest priority as we continue to deal with COVID-19. Sport plays an important role in the lives of so many Tasmanians with positive impacts on physical and mental health, community and social wellbeing. As I've said many times, sport in many cases is the glue that brings communities together.

I understand the impact COVID-19 has had on Tasmanian sporting communities. I thank everyone involved for their patience and commitment during this very challenging time. There were some dire predictions about the COVID-19 restrictions, that they would have going on as far the viability of community sporting organisations, with the Australian Sports Foundation predicting as many as 25 per cent of clubs would not survive. While many rosters and competitions in Tasmania were delayed and some competitions did not proceed at all in 2020, in general the impact has been less severe than it may have been or it was anticipated to be, which was very pleasing for us.

The funding provided through the Sport and Recreation COVID-19 Grants Tranche 1 provided \$1.9 million to 25 state sporting organisations which assisted in keeping 186 people employed in the sector from March to August 2020. This was really important because retaining staff meant that those organisations also retained corporate knowledge and had the people and resources to guide and assist their associations, leagues and clubs throughout the restrictions and during the resumption of activity.

We provided funding to 432 clubs to assist with return-to-play needs through Tranche 2; distributed nearly \$5 million through the Improving the Playing Field; and only two days ago announced the Tranche 3 and 4 grants programs. We also boosted Ticket to Play through the provision of two rather than one voucher for each eligible child in 2020-21 to address cost as a barrier to children to participate in sport, and we also increased the age of Ticket to Play from 17 years old to 18 years old as well. Ticket to Play is proving extremely successful and I know how grateful many clubs, associations and parents are for this.

Despite many of the national and international sporting competitions not occurring last year, the Tasmanian Institute of Sport has continued to keep its athletes connected online and ensured they maintain their fitness and wellbeing. In the absence of competition as a driving

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force for athletes to participate in high performance activities, the institute explored ways to maintain a level of momentum and athletes' interest in their daily training environment until national and international competition is available. They did this a lot through technology; we all learnt and adapted through that process. This adapted additional support, together with the advice, assistance and services provided to the sport and recreation sector by Communities, Sport and Recreation, has ensured the Tasmanian sport and recreation sector can continue to grow and offer opportunities to participate and the sector and athletes are very well supported.

As the Minister for Sport and Recreation, I'm extremely proud of the programs and initiatives that we've implemented to support this very important sector.

We are happy to take questions.

CHAIR - The funding that was made available here to help these organisations get through COVID-19, was that all expended? The total amount that you referred to, how much was expended?

Ms HOWLETT - Improving the Playing Field is \$10 million over two years. We will announce the second tranche of that at the end of the financial year this year.

Are you talking about the CLL?

CHAIR - I'm talking about the funding that sporting bodies were able to access through this process to give them the support they needed to keep moving, I suppose.

Ms HOWLETT - In response to COVID-19 the Tasmanian Government committed over \$7.8 million to support the sport and recreation sector including Tranche 1 - would you like me to go through?

CHAIR - Yes.

Ms HOWLETT - Tranche 1 was \$1.91 million in funding to the 25 state sporting organisations so that funding assisted in the 186 Tasmanians that we kept employed.

CHAIR - When you say the 25 -

Ms HOWLETT - State sporting organisations.

CHAIR - What were they?

Ms HOWLETT - Do we have a breakdown of those? Football, hockey, soccer -

Mr WILLIE - Perhaps you might be able to table that.

CHAIR - Yes, table that.

Ms HOWLETT - I can, yes. Due to lack of time I'm happy to table the document.

CHAIR - Table it; that would be great.

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Ms LANGENBERG - All of that funding has been paid to those 25 state sporting organisations. It was spent to keep the people employed during the period from March to August 2020 and all the funding has been completely acquitted.

CHAIR - Right. The total amount. Thank you. Questions, members?

Mr O'BYRNE - Of the 432 clubs that received the Return to Play, what was the average? Was it 2000, was it 3000?

Ms HOWLETT - That's a really good question, Mr O'Byrne, and it's all on that document we've just tabled.

Mr O'BYRNE - Okay. That's fine. Excellent.

Ms HOWLETT - That's all detailed.

Mr O'BYRNE - That's another document? Okay.

Ms HOWLETT - Tranche 1 is on there, on that document that we tabled before.

Mr O'BYRNE - Yes.

Ms HOWLETT - This is Tranche 2. I think you may want me to table this document too.

Mr O'BYRNE - That's right. I think I've seen it on the website, yes.

CHAIR - If you could.

Ms HOWLETT - Yes.

CHAIR - Thank you.

Ms HOWLETT - It's all broken down on that list.

Mr O'BYRNE - Of the global funding that was allocated during the COVID-19 period, how much was funding that would have normally been provided to the sporting clubs or the sporting associations, and how much is - what's the differential, effectively? What's the increase, the net increase of funding to sporting organisations above and beyond what they would have already received in one way or another?

Ms HOWLETT - The \$10 million for Improving the Playing Field was new money.

Mr O'BYRNE - New money, yes.

Ms HOWLETT - And the \$1.9 million for Tranche 1 and Tranche 2 for the small grants and the large grants was new money as well. Yes, so it was \$1.9 for Tranche 1. Approximately \$900 000 for Tranche 2.

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Mr O'BYRNE - That's \$2.8 million new money over and above what you normally would have distributed to sport and rec clubs, \$2.8 million.

Ms HOWLETT - As well as the \$10 million for Improving the Playing Field so that was \$5 million over -

Mr O'BYRNE - But wasn't Improving the Playing Field part of an election commitment?

Ms HOWLETT - No, that was Levelling the Playing Field.

Mr O'BYRNE - Levelling the Playing - okay.

Ms HOWLETT - Yes. I know they're very confusing because they're quite similar in their -

Mr O'BYRNE - No, no; it's just clarifying the money. The money saved from the Hawthorn deal, for example, how much was saved and did that part-fund that 10, 11 or \$12.8 million?

Ms HOWLETT - Would you like to talk about the Hawthorn deal, Helen, that usually goes through Events and State Growth?

Mr O'BYRNE - I understand that's in terms of the sponsorship deal as Events. I get that. The Government announced that that money would be redistributed to community sporting clubs. I want to make sure how much you received and where did it go?

Ms HOWLETT - The 2020-21 Budget included more than \$2 million of additional investment in sport and recreation. This included funding of \$1 million to Basketball Tasmania which was to deliver NBL1 score clinics in all regions of the state. I am pleased to say that they met their KPIs, didn't they, Helen, with the clinics that they had around Tasmania? Then we had an extra \$300 000 to Football Tasmania. That had a focus on increasing female participation.

CHAIR - That was over and above the \$500 000? Sorry, you said an additional \$300 000?

Ms HOWLETT - It was an extra \$300 000 to Football Tasmania, that's right.

Mr O'BYRNE - Is this included in the document that you've tabled?

Ms HOWLETT - No, I don't believe so. Then we had \$1.5 million in support for the Collingwood Magpies Netball team to play National Netball League games here in Tasmania.

Mr O'BYRNE - That is \$2.8 million. I'm trying to work this out. You said there is \$2 million extra. You've just identified \$2.8 million, one being an Events sponsorship arrangement with the Collingwood Magpies. The original question was, the money saved from the Hawthorn sponsorship, the Government announced that that would go to community sport. Could you identify that for us?

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Ms HOWLETT - Let me seek information. Mr O'Byrne, as I explained in Estimates late last year, the 2020-21 Budget included more than \$2 million of additional investment in sport and recreation. It included the \$1 million to basketball, as I've already stated, to deliver the NBL1 clinics around Tasmania and an extra \$300 000 for Football Tasmania.

CHAIR - The question being asked was in relation to the money that was saved from the Hawthorn deal inasmuch as they weren't here, weren't playing. That's the question. Maybe if you can stick with that, minister.

Ms HOWLETT - I would have to get an exact amount but I think \$1.9 million of that was contributed through Tranche 1. Helen, would you like to add to that?

Ms LANGENBERG - Minister, through you, my understanding is that the funding that was then allocated to Community Sport and Recreation to distribute through Tranche 1 which was slightly over \$1.9 million and the additional \$900 000 which was used to fund Tranche 2 formed part of those savings as well as the additional amounts -

Mr O'BYRNE - It seems to be that there's a back-filling of the extra money. Of the \$12 million that you've said is new money in, a part of that is offset from the Hawthorn savings. Is that right?

Ms LANGENBERG - My understanding is it's a redistribution of some of that funding because that was a saving from the Hawthorn Football Club agreement and so the funding was allocated to Community Sport and Recreation to allocate to the broader sport and recreation sector. Our way of doing that was to respond to the needs that we thought were caused by COVID-19.

Mr O'BYRNE - In terms of the two you've identified, the Collingwood Magpies Netball team - \$1.5 million for a game, we can talk about that at a different time and a different forum, but, the \$1 million to Basketball Tas. I understand that was for the delivery of the NBL1 training. The \$300 000 to Football Tas.

What process did they go through to get that money? What was the rationale behind those two codes, in particular, over and above other codes, why they got that money.

Ms LANGENBERG - Each of those organisations, through the Community budget submission process, submitted submissions, making additional requests for funding. The funding had been previously provided through to the three NBL1 clubs so funding for \$250 000 for the year, that they requested an extension of that, through Community budget submission.

Similarly, Football Tasmania, which is soccer, for Mr Dean's reference, because I think he got excited about football -

CHAIR - Yes, you are right.

Ms LANGENBERG - They put a submission in for additional funding for a range of projects and initiatives. One of those was related to the leveraging of the 2023 FIFA Women's World Cup, which is to be held in Australia. Hence, the allocation of the \$300 000 over two financial years.

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Mr O'BYRNE - So that is not actually for community sport?

CHAIR - Order.

Mr STREET - Let Mr O'Byrne go. I want to make a point of clarification once Mr O'Byrne has finished.

Mr O'BYRNE - I understand the process they went to, to make a bid. I am sure they weren't the only codes or sports to make a bid. What other bids were put in, and what was the reason why the basketball and football/soccer got the funds and others didn't?

Ms LANGENBERG - I think that a number of mainly state sporting organisations put in community budget submissions. To my recollection most of those were funded in some way or other, not necessarily 100 percent of their request. As I said, the Football Tasmania one was quite comprehensive and had, from memory, five or six different initiatives or projects they were requesting funding for.

I am less au fait to Government decisions about priorities in terms of allocating through the budget submission. From my recollection, most of those that applied through committee budget submissions received a level of funding.

Mr O'BYRNE - That begs a question of clarification. It is almost like you have the funding, which you have now submitted the list, which would have been, as a response to not only COVID-19 but budget submissions. Over and above that, for example, why did Football Tasmania get the \$300 000 over and above what other people may have got in terms of that process?

Ms LANGENBERG - A timing issue as much as anything, and in terms of that leveraging off the 2023 Women's World Cup, which is a strong and overriding impetus, not to mention the Tasmanian Government's priority, which is around increasing participation of women and girls in sport. It was a priority for the Government, a priority for Community Sport and Recreation, and also a priority for the sport.

CHAIR - We will go to Nic. He had a point of clarification.

Mr STREET - I wanted confirmation, minister. The savings made on the Hawthorn deal weren't a Sport and Recreation saving, though were they, because the Hawthorn Deal is through Events Tasmania? I guess the point I want to make on the record for the committee, is that the money saved on the Hawthorn deal is no different to the money that was saved by Dark MOFO not going ahead, for example.

Mr O'BYRNE - The only reason I asked it is because the Government said, we are going to plough that from elite sport into community sport. So, it is more of a response for the Government's media.

Mr STREET - I understand that as well, but from what you were saying, I think you are trying to make the point that all we had done is transfer it from one sporting event to another. What I am saying is that it was money that wasn't allocated by Sport and Recreation to start off with to Hawthorn. It was Events Tasmania's money that has been redirected.

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CHAIR - Thanks, Nic. You have made that point. It is a point that we now have clear.

Mr O'BYRNE - The \$300 000: you talk about leveraging World Cup. Is that extra infrastructure? What is it actually for?

Ms HOWLETT - We would be needing a lot of extra infrastructure if we manage to get those camps here. It will be amazing and so exciting for -

Mr O'BYRNE - I am in no way critical. I want to understand because a couple of codes have said we got the initial grant, but they were taken by surprise that other codes got more money, and they didn't understand it. So, for this committee, I suppose, if it is a COVID-19 related expenditure, when you say leveraging, it could mean a whole lot of things to a whole lot of people. I'm not being critical, I just want to know what it is.

Ms LANGENBERG - It's certainly not funding that will be used for infrastructure, and it's seen that other programs like Improving the Playing Field, for example, provide those resources across a broad range of sports. It's \$300 000 over two financial years and it's really to assist Football Tasmania to have a greater emphasis on women and girls in this sport, in terms of participants and developing coaches and officials; raising the profile of women and girls within the sport and then being able to leverage off the World Cup, as we said.

Some of that is still a little uncertain, because the Federation of International Football Association (FIFA) is not making an announcement over the hosting of the games until next week. However, we're still hopeful of securing games in Tasmania or even training venues in Tasmania as well. There might be an event or an activity that actually promotes the 'you can be what you can see' to the girls and women in Tasmanian football.

Mr O'BYRNE - I'm supportive of it. So, it's \$150 000 in the current financial year we're in and then it's \$150 000 in 2021-22 for leveraging. I'm sure there's a Deed of Arrangement between yourselves and Football Tasmania about how that's acquitted.

Ms LANGENBERG - There will be a Deed of Arrangement - we're still at discussions with Football Tasmania. Part of that is because sport, as you know, is to some extent still playing a little bit of catch-up because of the disruption to their sport last year. We haven't wanted to hurry them, but we'll have meaningful discussions with them very shortly about what that will look like and what the key performance indicators will be.

Mr WILLIE - I have some questions on restrictions. Minister, what are the current restrictions for sporting events, and what communication are you having with Public Health around those restrictions - and also with community clubs? We are about to head into football season of various codes, as well as basketball and netball. What is Public Health telling you about those restrictions? To put some more context around it, what impact will the vaccination program have, and the risk profile for the community? If you could provide some information around that, because I'm sure that's going to come to a crunch very soon.

Ms HOWLETT - As far as the COVID-19 roll out - that's a matter for the Minister for Health. Obviously, we have a plan to roll out the vaccine here in Tasmania -

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Mr WILLIE - Public Health hasn't provided you, as Sports minister, any information around what the tipping point is to ease restrictions, such as capacity at grounds and things like that? A lot of community clubs rely on that.

Ms HOWLETT - Absolutely, and Kate is certainly dealing with that with the Events Framework. Would you like to speak to that, Kate?

Ms KENT - Probably two components. With sports actually returning to play and their fixtures, there's been a process in place since last July, hasn't there, in terms of ensuring that they were able to offer that in a safe way. When you talk about bigger events, as you mentioned, there's an Events Framework that's managed through Public Health, Community Sport and Recreation and State Growth. It's managed through a portal for people to apply to have events, and there's a range of those, as you know - Level 1, 2 and 3.

So, if we're talking about larger sporting events such as AFL games and other things over this summer - rowing regattas, for example - have all applied to have those where there were over 1000 people or up to 5000 people. There's a framework in which we all operate - those organisations, sport and recreation ones as well as other cultural organisations put in applications; we work with them really closely to ensure they can run a safe event. We also work closely with local governments that often are the facility owners of where the events are held. I know that question came up in Estimates as well back in November, and that was just prior to the framework coming in to play.

Ms HOWLETT - On that point, Kate, everyone has seen cricket games, our cup carnivals - Barrington at the moment. Everyone is doing such an exceptional job up there, and it takes a lot to put these event frameworks together. Kate, as you will know, you go through Category 2 and then Category 3 is up to 10 000 people. There is so much work that goes into putting those forward, and we've seen some really successful -

Mr WILLIE - From a club level, too, it would be quite -

Ms KENT - In relation to the second part of your question was around how do those restrictions perhaps change over time. The framework is talked about as being a living document. Public Health through their AHPCC, I think is the acronym for the national body, continues to look at what the public health restrictions should be nationally.

The Director of Public Health has the say in terms of what those restrictions look like and how they can, over time, be increased. Part of that is also based on how well events can be run now, with those restrictions in place.

Recently the restrictions on seated capacity increased. Predominantly that impacted on theatres and more cultural events, and the issues around, as we know prior to Christmas, where food and drink is served and those sorts of issues. Those three agencies meet weekly to look at all of the events and the applications being sought and work through what the issues are and the changing dynamic.

Mr WILLIE - Minister, what sort of feedback are you getting from clubs around the Events Framework? Is it hard for them to manage? A lot of them are volunteer-based organisations. I'm thinking of perhaps two popular community clubs meeting in a fixture. It

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might not be a final, or they may not know if they're going to get over 1000 people. How do they manage that?

Ms HOWLETT - It's very difficult, because a lot of the clubs are managed by volunteers. They're trying to juggle work and trying to work out how many they're going to get through the gate as well.

Ms KENT - I think you'll see there's an article in today's *Mercury* with Damian Gill from the AFL talking about the work they do with clubs and others to look at the upcoming season and how that will be run and managed by the leagues, and the individual clubs as well. They're certainly working really hard to provide support for the clubs within their structures, so people know how to do the applications if they're required at all. If there's smaller events under 1000, they don't need to. They do need to consider that for those larger ones.

The focus is mostly on sanitation, if you like; about having lots of opportunities for people to have hand sanitiser, marshalling and queue management at events so there aren't large congregations of people in close proximity. There are the public health concerns still around any large gatherings.

Ms HOWLETT - Communities has been really good at working with these event volunteers - if it's been knocked back and why has it been knocked back; how can we do this better and how can we help you. There are people there to help them as well with the applications.

Mr WILLIE - Another question in that space, is public health communicating with Government and you around the vaccination program and when there's an expectation that some of these restrictions on community events will change?

Ms HOWLETT - I have a weekly meeting in Cabinet and we have discussions in Cabinet every week on that.

Mr WILLIE - Do you understand how much of the population has to be vaccinated, or what percentage of the high-risk population has to be vaccinated, before some of these restrictions can change?

Ms HOWLETT - I can't release any information that is discussed in Cabinet, as I'm sure you're well aware.

Mr WILLIE - I'm not asking you to release that information.

Ms HOWLETT - No, but I'm sure the Health minister will have more to say on that in the coming weeks as we get more people vaccinated here. We're concentrating on 1A and then 1B and the roll out. We'll have more to say on that as soon as we can.

CHAIR - I go back to the previous questions asked by David in relation to Racing Tasmania. Have you had any discussions with the Director of Public Health in relation to sporting activities and the numbers of people who are entitled to be at certain events? Do you have any input into the decision that is made by the Director of Public Health, or is it an

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arbitrary decision made by the Director of Public Health that is forced back down onto you, as the minister, to implement?

Ms HOWLETT - Kate, you would have had quite a bit to do with creating the Events Framework. We needed to work on that straight away and, as Kate mentioned before, it's a document that is moving every week and we're changing the guideposts there. You would have dealt more with events, and the minister for Events, as far as creating that document and obviously there would have been a lot of stakeholder engagement as well with that.

CHAIR - What input do you have to the Director of Health in the Director of Health making these decisions that there will only be certain numbers of events, etcetera, to comply? What input do you or your staff have? Surely, it's not just a decision made -

Ms HOWLETT - No, it's not. We certainly have those discussions in Cabinet every week, Chair. We have our contribution there.

CHAIR - Yes, I know. I'm not talking about in Cabinet but surely you, as the minister responsible here, I would have thought - or is it the Premier goes on your behalf? Is that it? I just wonder how -

Ms HOWLETT - Let me clarify. Are you talking about how the Events Framework -

CHAIR - How the restrictions continue to apply in relation to sporting events. We know that the Director of Health makes that decision. What I am asking is, what does the Director of Health base that decision on? Does he base that on any information coming from you in relation to your position?

Ms HOWLETT - His advice certainly comes from National Cabinet and then they meet, and then his fellow health ministers too. Kate, do you want to -

Ms KENT - I am happy to try to clarify - the Events Framework was based on both AHPCC advice around the issues, the guiding principles, if you like, around how it will be safe to gather in terms of numbers. It certainly talks about whether events are daily events, or there has been discussion about overnight events and other things like that - the ability to maintain physical distancing between people and the event venue, whether they're outdoors, indoors, seated, where you can know where people are going to be seated and subsequently that will make it easier for contact tracing or whether it's just a gathering like, I guess, the Falls Festival versus a Theatre Royal event so in that sort of scheme -

Ms HOWLETT - Indoor, outdoor.

Ms KENT - and other considerations. Based on all of that information the Events Framework then determines there are these levels of events. I guess, from a sport or other organisation's perspective, they can then see if the proposed event they are going to have - whether it's a race event in the minister's other portfolio - is 3000 or 5000, what would that look like and is that still an event that we would run normally, I guess - is that how the event would look.

The advice around what that - I guess from sporting organisations - and this is the discussion we would have had with AFL towards the end of last season - 'we want to run our

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finals' thing, 'we would normally have X number of people at a finals'; what does it look like to run a restricted event and how can you run it safely. That feedback comes through the minister through to the agencies.

Agencies such as ours provide input into Public Health around 'these are the sorts of normal events that you would have; how can they run safely'. The feedback is coming via the minister's portfolio. She certainly would let us know about stakeholders that have approached her just as we get stakeholders that come to us and say 'how can we run this event and what does it look like' and, I guess, we want to do it more so the future, how does the future look if we want to continue to run bigger events, where will that be, whether we can have more people coming to our events, will it be when everyone is vaccinated and more safe is a Public Health decision but we can talk about it to Public Health.

We provide advice around what would normally be this sort of event, like the rowing regattas all summer. They include 500 or 1000 people. They do this, they do that. What does that event look like and how can we run it safely. Then the Director of Public Health, if they're a Level 3 event, will make a decision, or I'm his delegate for Level 2, as is a Deputy Secretary from State Growth.

Mr O'BYRNE - I suppose the frustration is, for example, when you have an AFL grand final at the Gabba in a state where they had community transmission more recent than we did and you can only get - what was it - 1000 at North Hobart Oval for a grand final in a, obviously, much smaller ground, but the point is well made that I think there's a level of frustration that we've had a level of good luck and good preparation and response -

CHAIR - And good management.

Mr O'BYRNE - and good management over a long period of time compared to other states, yet our sporting events - like the issue that was raised of the Kingborough Stadium where they had seven or eight different areas in their facility but the facility was treated as one and therefore the numbers were pretty restrictive. I suppose the frustration is that there seems to be a different rule applied.

Ms KENT - Through you, minister, what has happened over time is that there has been changes to some of those restrictions. Once through Public Health, they can see that events can be run safely at a different level and there has been that consideration given, there has been changes in the numbers that are able to attend, as the ones just announced recently, that is based on that 'how has it worked and can it work effectively and do people still behave safely'.

Ms HOWLETT - We did see that with the cricket. Initially the numbers were -

Mr O'BYRNE - Chair, on another topic, the Community Support Levy-funded grant rounds that were suspended last year, why were they suspended? What is the status of the funds that are being raised? What's the process there?

Ms HOWLETT - I was clear at Budget Estimates last year about the impact of COVID-19 on the Community Support Levy revenue. As I stated, while the Department of Treasury and Finance initially estimated that more than \$1.036 million would be available to distribution in 2019-20 this was revised down to \$865 000 due to the impact of COVID-19 restrictions. Treasury estimated available funds would be reduced by up to 40 per cent in that

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current financial year and, as we mentioned in Estimates, that due to the reduction of the CSL funding, the department deferred that. They had to defer that to 2020-21 and minor and major sports grants program given there was a significant shortfall but not as much as we thought it would be.

Deferring that enabled the department to receive feedback from sectors in Tranches 1 and 2 to determine any subsequence in funding gaps as well. Following that feedback, we determined that an extension to the COVID-19 support grants program was needed in the form of two new tranches of the program. That was the value of up to \$1 million.

Mr O'BYRNE - Is that what you announced in parliament the other day?

Ms HOWLETT - The final impact on the pandemic of the CSL funding can't determined yet until the end of this financial year. Would you like to add any more to that, Helen?

Ms LANGENBERG - In 2019-20 the CSL fundings were effectively disbursed through the 2019-20 major grants program which went ahead in 2019-20 and the first round of minor grants program was also offered and went ahead and grants were paid.

The only thing that wasn't distributed in 2019-20 was Round 2 of the minor grants program which was held pending, as the minister advised, clarification on the amount of funding that was available. The CSL funding for 2019-20 was effectively disbursed to the sector -

Mr O'BYRNE - 2020-21?

Ms LANGENBERG - 2020-21 was again, as the minister's just advised, we looked at that funding. Given the fact that Improving the Playing Field offers funding for infrastructure projects, funding of between \$25 000 and \$250 000, we questioned whether there was a need for major grants given the purposes are ostensibly the same. After the discussion with the sector, that's why we've offered instead using the CSL funds still for the benefit of sports and recreation clubs. That's providing the funding for Tranche 3 and Tranche 4 - Tranche 3 being the small grants of up to \$300 000 for the Return to Play.

Ms HOWLETT - Just one second there, Helen, because these sporting organisations will still need hand-sanitising units, new sporting equipment -

Mr O'BYRNE - You won't have any argument here about supporting clubs. I want to find out where the money is coming from. Earlier you identified a series of expenditure and said that the Government is investing new money.

Ms HOWLETT - Which we have.

Mr O'BYRNE - I'm not arguing that but I just want to clarify what it is. You are arguing new money but this is now CSL money that's being used to fund those commitments and you announced Tranche 1 and Tranche 2, which are not really COVID-19-related necessarily. It's just a redistribution of the CSL funding. Is that right?

Ms LANGENBERG - No, Tranche 1 and Tranche 2 were new money.

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Mr O'BYRNE - I meant to say the next tranches that were announced.

Ms LANGENBERG - Tranche 3 and Tranche 4 are the use of the CSL funds for 2020-21 being dispersed in a different way so not through major and minor grants, which have been suspended for this financial year. Instead, we're offering Tranche 3 which is the Return to Play necessities - sanitation, that sort of thing.

Mr O'BYRNE - So the CSL funding and the traditional method in which it's distributed through you, minister, will no longer be distributed through the traditional way? It's now been applied to the COVID-19 funding. That wasn't made clear when you announced that money. It seemed it was an announcement of new money when you made that announcement earlier this week, minister. Essentially, it's not new money; you're just reallocating the CSL in a different way.

CHAIR - Let the minister answer that.

Ms HOWLETT - As we spoke about, the \$10 million for Improving the Playing Field is new money. As far as what we will do with Tranche 3 and Tranche 4 - the CSL money - next year, that could well go back to how it used to be distributed. Helen, I guess they are discussions we'll have to have.

Mr O'BYRNE - Minister, to be clear. What I heard was that the next two tranches you announced, we've just heard from the department that they've said that will be funded by the CSL but you've just said that won't be funded by the CSL; you haven't made a decision on that.

Ms HOWLETT - No, I said as to the following financial year where that funding would go, it might go back into the minor and major grants programs, not for Return to Play and COVID-19 -

Mr O'BYRNE - I'm not pitching forward to the forward Estimates. The question was around the CSL money that was delayed. It was, as you clarified, the Round 2 minor grants for the last part of the 2020 and the 2021 year that the CSL grants as sporting clubs across the state would normally receive them and approach and make submissions will not occur. That money will now be transferred across to the third and fourth tranche of the COVID-19 response money. Is that right?

Ms LANGENBERG - We are nearly there. The second round of minor grants from 2019-20, the funding for that, will be dispersed still. That process was almost complete.

Mr O'BYRNE - From the 2019-20 money?

Ms LANGENBERG - Once that's clarified so we're still a couple of weeks away with Treasury in terms of having those figures confirmed as to what the funding pitch looks like. We will be providing advice to the minister within a fortnight in relation to that but we are expecting that those minor grants Round 2 from 2019-20 will be advised of outcomes.

The funding that's being repurposed -

Mr O'BYRNE - There are many ways you can reference that.

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Ms LANGENBERG - The 2020-21 CSL funding - internally we were reviewing the major and minor grants programs anyway. We do that regularly each year with each of our grants programs. We got to a point where we actually felt that the minor and major grants as they were weren't quite fit for purpose anyway in terms of the size and the scope of the projects we could fund using those.

So we'd undertaken the start of a review of that. It's been overtaken a little by the COVID-19 response so we're repurposing the 2020-21 CSL funds for Tranche 3 and Tranche 4. Between now and the end of this financial year, we'll be looking at what the impact of that has been for the sector and getting feedback from the sector. Then we'll come up with, as the minister advised, a future plan of what that CSL funding might look like, knowing that it must be for the benefit of sport and recreation clubs.

Mr O'BYRNE - Minister, your announcement during the week did not make that clear. The announcement was almost like it was new money - COVID-19-related.

CHAIR - I think that you've asked the question; that's a statement you're making now on what the minister has said.

Mr O'BYRNE - I am happy to hear the minister's response.

CHAIR - You need to make it a question.. We're about out of time so if there are any new questions we need to move forward.

Mr TUCKER - Minister, what can you tell us about the additional support under the Sport and Recreation Program that the Government will be providing for the sector?

Ms HOWLETT - Additional support?

Mr TUCKER - Yes.

Ms HOWLETT - Thank you. As we have spoken about before, we have had Tranche 1 of the COVID-19 Sport and Recreation Grants Program which provided grants of up to \$150 000 to Tasmanian sporting organisations to assist with salaries. Through Tranche 1, more than \$1.9 million was granted to 25 sporting organisations, which assisted with the salaries of 186 employees across the sector.

Tranche 2 had a focus on supporting grassroots clubs return to play, in accordance with Public Health requirements, providing small grants of up to \$3000 to purchase items such as hygiene supplies, additional equipment, and most importantly, a lot of signage as well. Through Tranche 2, more than \$900 000 was granted to 431 clubs across more than 40 sports to help them return to play.

Earlier this week, I announced that as part of the Government's plan to rebuild a stronger Tasmania, the Government will continue to support the state's sport and recreation organisations through the ongoing challenges faced as a result of COVID-19.

Applications are now available for funding under Tranches 3 and 4 of the COVID-19 Sport and Recreation Grants Program to assist these organisations. Tranche 3 will be an extension to Tranche 2 and will provide sport and recreation clubs and associations with grants

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of up to \$3000 to assist with hygiene, equipment purchases, more signage, et cetera, so they can return to an active play of safety plans. Tranche 3 will close on 9 April 2021 or when funding is exhausted -

Mr O'BYRNE - That is funding from the CSL?

Ms HOWLETT - Tranche 3 will close on 9 April 2021 or when funding is exhausted. Organisations will be funded on a first in basis, as well. That is really important. Organisations funded under Tranche 2 are not eligible to apply for Tranche 3. Approximately \$250 000 will be available for distribution under Tranche 3.

Tranche 4 will provide sport and recreation clubs with funding of between \$3000 and \$25 000 to assist with the purchase of much needed equipment. Tranche 4 will close on 19 April 2021. It is important to note, that with this, applicants will be required to contribute at least 20 per cent of the total project cost. Tranche 4 is a competitive grants program and approximately \$750 000 will be available for distribution under tranche 4.

The two grants program, Tranches 3 and 4, are being administered with available Community Support Levy - CSL funding - for 2020-21.

CHAIR - Thank you.

Ms HOWLETT - My apologies. I believe I said 431 instead of 432 recreation clubs.

CHAIR - Minister, thank you very much. We are out of time, and I understand that you must leave pretty much on time as well.

Thank you very much for your attendance here today, and the way in which you have answered questions. We appreciate it very much, not to say that this committee might not have to invite you back again. It is a recovery process that we are looking at as well, so that is going to move on for a period of time.

Thank you, Kate, thank you Helen. Thank you to the rest of your staff.

Ms HOWLETT - I thank Kate and Helen and Laura and Richard behind me, and the secretary, Mr Pervan. Thank you to Hansard as well.

THE WITNESSES WITHDREW.

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Mr PETER CORNISH, CEO, FRUIT GROWERS TASMANIA WAS CALLED, MADE THE STATUTORY DECLARATION AND WAS EXAMINED.

CHAIR - You might not know all members. We have Nic Street at the end of the table; John Tucker; myself, Ivan Dean; David O'Byrne; and Josh Willie. Ruth Forrest is a member of this committee but is an apology today for family reasons. At the back we have Nat Exel, our secretary, and Allie Waddington, our assistant secretary. Gaye Mitchell from Hansard is at the front.

This is a public session, it's open to the public; we are on the air. Hansard is recording it as well and it will be reduced to writing in due course.

While you are in here, you have parliamentary privilege and you are protected by that privilege. Once you leave here, it's doubtful that you are, so you need to be very careful once you leave here. Here you are protected; outside it's not too sure.

You have read the terms of reference? That's good. This inquiry has been going on for some time now, and throughout a lot of this inquiry issues have come up in relation to small fruit growers in this state in particular, and the ability to get labourers, to get people in, to harvest all of those fruits. This committee is wanting further information in relation to the issues and problems associated with COVID-19 in your area.

I give you the option to make any opening statement, Peter, or we can go straight into questions; whatever you're comfortable with.

Mr CORNISH - I don't mind, whatever you'd prefer.

CHAIR - If you have a statement, yes, certainly. We have to 4.50 p.m. I will leave it with you.

Mr CORNISH - Fruit Growers Tasmania welcome and appreciate the proactive approach that was taken by the Tasmanian Government in response to COVID-19. The Government established the Agricultural Coordination Group in April 2020. This proved a very effective forum across industry, sharing of information as well as the provision of advice to and from Government.

This included the development of safe workplace guidelines for agriculture. In this regard, both Safe Farming Tasmania and WorkSafe Tasmania have consistently provided practical support to agricultural businesses.

The real benefit and the learnings to take out of this, is the approach that was taken by both these organisations, we believe. They provided templates, check lists and guidelines that made compliance easier. They didn't focus on what industry couldn't do, they focused on what was likely to achieve positive health and safety outcomes.

In April 2020, the Government announced some financial support for temporary visa holders as well, which is a very important part of our seasonal labour force. I think it was probably the first state in the country to do that. They also recognised that agriculture was an essential service, and this was important to allow us to continue to operate that 2019-20 harvest.

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Part way through last year, Fruit Growers Tasmania and our growers worked hard to detail seasonal labour requirements for the 2020-21 harvest. Our survey work delivered a whole heap of factual information which was integrated very sensibly with the Department of Primary Industries environmental scan, to provide an overall picture for reasonable labour demand.

On the back of this data, Fruit Growers Tasmania developed a seasonal labour strategy, and it was delivered to both the state and federal governments in early August of last year. Our aim in developing these nine initiatives was to use the time we had to get ahead of the issues we would face when we reached harvest time, and to be proactive rather than reactive which so many industries have been forced to do during the pandemic.

While the response from the federal government to our initiatives was probably best described as patchy, undoubtedly the response from the Tasmanian government was rapid and comprehensive. Many of our initiatives were not original and were also being worked upon by the Government leading up to this time, having held discussions with industry for a number of months.

The Agricultural Workforce Resilience package was announced on 18 April 2020 and this was a partnership with industry. The two-year package has already made a very significant difference. The Tasmanian Agricultural Jobs Campaign has been well-managed, and has lifted the profile of the agricultural sector and has widely publicised the opportunities that are available for locals to participate.

The campaign has undoubtedly led to increased interest and also participation from locals. There was also a boost to the Strategic Industry Partnership program, and this saw direct financial support to the fruit industry of some \$113 000 over the two years. That's allowed us to work on expanding Tasmania's agricultural workforce, monitor industry recovery and assist Tasmanian businesses to build resilience.

Similarly, there's an associated seasonal worker transport pilot, which involves funding to Fruit Growers Tasmania of some \$208 000 over two years. The program aims to identify and deliver transport services to those workers with no transport - or no economic transport - options, to provide them with the opportunity to participate in harvest work. This is a difficult area of work, I must say, but we commend the Government for seeking to address the issue.

The other significant component of that package was the boost to Farming Tasmania to add an additional employee. That's been really important to allow Safe Tasmania to get out and about to help business manage health and safety during the pandemic.

Minister Barnett also established a Tasmanian Agricultural Workforce Roundtable. I must say, when I heard about a roundtable, you could be forgiven for thinking 'not another roundtable'. Quite frankly, this forum has actually worked. It has helped to deliver real outcomes, and I think its secret has been to get all the relevant departments in the same room, as much as anything to hear from, consider and propose initiatives that would increase our supply of workers while keeping people safe.

Fruit Growers submitted to the roundtable proposals to support the safe return of their seasonal program workers from interstate, and developing guidelines for safe quarantine and isolation, primarily on-farm. These experienced workers were essential to combine with locals.

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Our fruit growers were delighted that these returning seasonal workers were included in the first stage of the relief of border restrictions announced on 18 September. Again, WorkSafe Tasmania worked very co-operatively with growers.

At the same time, it was really important for us to get access to additional workers from overseas through the Seasonal Worker Program, direct from the home countries across the Pacific and Timor-Leste. It was important that the Tasmanian Government opted-in to the restart of the Seasonal Worker Program in early September 2020. It was one of the first to do so, which was again, very welcome.

This was a long and complex process and I don't think either industry or government knew how hard and how much work was taken to put this together. With charter flights, hotel quarantine, no Border Force capability here, and the need for the government to negotiate with other states. It was a very significant effort, particularly from the part of the government.

Some 625 people across four flights from Tonga and Timor-Leste have made a very significant difference to being able to harvest our fruit this season through this program. While this has come at a major cost to growers in the form of the charter flights, the financial support from the Tasmanian Government to rebate the cost of hotel quarantine, and provide individual financial support to each person, at an overall cost of some \$1.9 million, made these charters viable for growers. It is fair to say that the Tasmanian Government has undoubtedly led the way across all states in the effectiveness of their support for the resumption of the Seasonal Worker Program.

Finally, opportunities continue to be available for Tasmanian businesses to participate in the Seasonal Worker Program and bring their workers into the state in conjunction with the flights for Victorian growers. The flexibility bringing in small groups is an important option for Tasmanian businesses which they are making good use of.

Most importantly, all these efforts by industry and the Tasmanian Government have worked. While there is still plenty of the harvest to go, and the situation to date has not been perfect, all of these initiatives have made an enormous difference. The harvest has largely progressed well for the majority of growers with only small and isolated crop losses and worker shortages. Importantly, locals have been given every opportunity to participate in harvest work at a time when having jobs available has been most important.

I must say, in conclusion, on behalf of Tasmania Fruit Growers, I would like to record our appreciation to the Tasmanian Government for their sensible, timely and comprehensive support during this COVID-19 pandemic.

CHAIR - Peter, thank you very much for that comprehensive discussion with this, in relation to those matters. I am not sure if I asked you, whether you stated your position with Fruit Growers. Is that on record?

Mr CORNISH - I am the CEO of Fruit Growers Tasmania.

CHAIR - Thank you for that. I think you said there has been a significant cost to them in bringing out these employees. Is this a shared cost amongst all of those growers who have employed these people, and I suspect that, in any other year, these people make their own way

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out here for work and whatever it is. Is that the case? This was an added cost to them because of COVID-19?

Mr CORNISH - There is a cost that is shared by the grower and also the worker. Normally they are on normal flights, so it is pretty straightforward and fairly inexpensive. There is some payment made by the worker as well, but all these flights had to be charter flights which had to be met by the growers upfront, so they were significantly more expensive, and a much smaller amount was able to be recovered or contributed by the individual workers.

CHAIR - So the growers all came together to determine how many employees they wanted. Is that the way it was done?

Mr CORNISH - It particularly applied to the berry growers. They're the ones who really use the Seasonal Worker Program because you really need to have them employed for at least six or seven months so it's an important part of the cohort. They came together and organised these charter flights and paid for them and contracted them and did all of that, and then worked closely with the government to get the clearances, particularly through Border Force and then through hotel quarantine which the government did rebate, and that rebating of that cost made the whole thing economic and viable and allowed it to go forward.

CHAIR - I think you said that the loss of crops was minimal.

Mr CORNISH - Yes, it was generally minimal; that's right. We were fortunate. There's some tight times and there were some isolated issues in some areas but, generally speaking, the majority of people got through okay so far. We've still got a bit more to go yet.

Mr O'BYRNE - I want to talk about freight logistics. When COVID-19 hit, and obviously market supply lines were impacted, what was the impact on the industry in those early days? I know particularly the berry and apple season was coming towards the end but can you talk us through the impact on the freight and logistics line?

Mr CORNISH - Originally when COVID-19 hit it was the end of our cherry export season so it really only hit the last part of it and it was more about demand rather than anything else. For berries and apples, which are fundamentally domestic crops, also because transport was made an essential service, they really kept going with no problems from that transport logistic point of view up until the middle of when they finished in about June of last year.

Looking forward to this year was a big concern because our cherry exports in particular are all air-freight and without passenger flights and underbelly capacity, which the vast majority of that went out on, that was a big issue so I guess that's where the federal government's IFAM process made a big difference in terms of partly on the side of cost but also on the capacity side of it. Thankfully, we've got through this harvest and that export program. The export program has been strong. It has cost them more, undoubtedly, for our growers but overall it has been a positive for them.

Mr O'BYRNE - What proportion of your membership relies on the TT-Line for its freight?

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Mr CORNISH - It's a good question. I think a significant amount would use - I mean, they use all of them but, undoubtedly, I think one of the benefits of TT-Line is its reliability and so quite a few would, but they would use all three of the operators on Bass Strait.

Mr O'BYRNE - As a part of the COVID-19 circumstances the Government has paused the replacement of the TT-Line vessels. There was a commitment to give an uplift of capacity of around 40 per cent so obviously there's a number of time-sensitive fresh-freight kind of exporters that would benefit from an uplift in capacity - the first ones were due to be on the run next year. They've delayed that to potentially 2028.

We've seen the salmon industry come out and be quite concerned about that decision and then they also raise the issue that the government hadn't consulted them in terms of the task force they established. Has the task force spoken to you about the needs of the industry in relation to the work that they're doing on the recommendations to Government?

Mr CORNISH - No, it hasn't.

Mr O'BYRNE - Do you think it's important that Government should consult with the industry that relies on the service about the future of the service?

Mr CORNISH - It wouldn't be inappropriate. It's not something that has been a focus for our industry but there's no doubt TT-Line plays an important part in that whole mix that is Bass Strait, for sure.

Mr O'BYRNE - With a potential seven-, six-year delay of an increase in capacity on Bass Strait through TT-Line, would that be of concern?

Mr CORNISH - It depends what happens with supply and demand over that time, and the fact that SeaRoad is about to introduce a larger vessel certainly helps. We haven't had any capacity issues over the last year; certainly, the year before there were some. A lot of hypotheticals: if trade grows and capacity is stretched, that could well become an issue but it's not something that has been prominent in the minds of growers thus far.

Mr O'BYRNE - Thank you.

Mr STREET - In terms of Mr O'Byrne's scaremongering, there is a delay in the process but not necessarily a delay in an increase in capacity across Bass Strait as well so -

Mr O'BYRNE - How do you figure that? That's not actually true.

Mr STREET - My conversations with your organisation, Peter, in the past and with members of your industry is about where we put pickers when we get them here in housing them and what have you. This season, obviously, was a different conversation about where are we going to get them from.

One of the frustrations of some of the growers who I speak to is their inability to be able to engage more locals. What can we do going forward to potentially incentivise getting more locals to take up these jobs? I just want to be very clear, I am not about demonising unemployed people here I'm simply asking - are there things we can do going forward to help meet the

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demand that the growers have with local workers in conjunction with bringing in overseas workers which we'll, obviously, always have to do?

Mr CORNISH - It is a very challenging area. Normally, and when we did our survey last year, we peak at about 8000 positions in January which probably means you need about 10 000 to 12 000 people to fill those positions seven days a week. Of that, normally speaking, about 2000 would be locals; about 3500 would be working holiday-makers; 1500 from the Seasonal Worker Program and about 1000 international students who were here. That proportion has changed markedly, of course, this year and it has been very important that the Government jumped on the campaign.

Of our initiatives, that was the one we were most concerned might not get traction and we were completely wrong. It's relieved the profile of the industry and the opportunities and the biggest thing from our industry is to let people know there are opportunities. It is up to them whether they take them or not and we need to be realistic and honest about the nature of that work, which is seasonal. That is the biggest issue. The seasonality of the work is the biggest thing that holds back locals from being involved. They would like to have 12 months and not seasonal but if we can work harder on trying to link those together - the different seasonal work that goes on. We are by far the most significant industry in terms of seasonal work.

For that campaign to continue there is a background then in trying to help on the skills side of it and encourage people and let people know that there are ongoing careers as well and out of seasonal work comes ongoing careers, which is important. The biggest single untapped area that we believe did sit in the federal government's area and that was in the area of JobSeeker. We proposed that the amount of money you can earn under JobSeeker be increased the same as Austudy. You could earn up to \$9000 in one block under Austudy without it affecting your payments and I think it's now been increased to \$150 a fortnight and it can only be banked up to about \$1000 or less than \$2000.

What we're after there is to increase the incentive to work, not take away the disincentive. That's probably the biggest area, apart from the campaign to try to prepare people with the opportunity of skills who come into agricultural work and make sure there's a campaign and explanation about what's involved.

CHAIR - What has COVID-19 done to the industry? Has it opened up all of these other avenues, opportunities? What are the lessons you might have learnt from the fruit growers and so on? I guess one would be ensuring their access to employees at all times if it happened again. Where are we placed moving forward in your industry?

Mr CORNISH - I think that it is going to happen again. We won't have this solved by next year.

It's challenging. I think we've got an increase in the participation of our locals but it's difficult. It's been very challenging. It hasn't been an easy experience for growers in engaging locals this year. We're lucky we live in a First World country where it's a bit more discretionary about getting involved with some of these jobs. Yet we have a range of people who have come here and travelled a long way to come here and take these jobs up and very happily do so.

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It's a challenge to try to work out how to get locals involved. It would be good to do so but I think it has clarified the reliance of the industry on both the Seasonal Worker Program and I think we'll have a greater interest from growers to engage the Seasonal Worker Program but also the reliance on working holiday-makers who are normally very keen to participate in these jobs.

CHAIR - Moving ahead to the next season which is not all that far away again - it comes up very quickly - you're satisfied that you would have the similar access to all of these workers should that happen and with the support of the Government moving forward?

Mr CORNISH - I wouldn't say I'm satisfied. To be honest to say we've pulled a lot of levers and pressed a lot of buttons to try to put the best foot forward. On the basis, so far, we're going to get through. It will be challenging because there'll be less working holiday-makers in the country by the time we get to the next time around.

If, on the current trends of where we're at unless there's a big change, that will be more challenging. I think we'll need to work more about how we engage more locals but I think we'll have to have a more active program around the Seasonal Worker Program and attracting and being able to get workers in from the Pacific Islands and Timor-Leste.

I think there'll be a lot more demand from growers to have that as the reliable backbone and then supplement them from other areas as well. It's been a very challenging year but so far we've got through.

CHAIR - I think it's fairly clear that the way we're progressing that we're going to be restricted for quite a lot longer, I would think. Therefore, the planning moving forward needs to be clear and avenues open for getting these employees in. I take it you're continuing to talk with the Government in relation to where you're going to go into the future?

Mr CORNISH - Most of this was always put in as a two-year program which was a positive. We're also somewhat going to touch on the Seasonal Worker Transport Pilot. We've been trying to identify what cohort of people out there who don't have access to transport or affordable transport, how big that is and how we can try to give them the opportunity to be involved.

It is a difficult area. So far, we certainly haven't been inundated with people. We have to keep working on trying to make sure we get that message out to people that there are opportunities there and seeing how they might be involved.

We have to look at all those areas. We certainly have to keep putting ourselves out there and letting people know their opportunities. It's a growing industry. This is issue of workers is only going to get more, not less because there's continuing investment and that's a positive thing.

CHAIR - How is the industry growing? What percentage growth are we seeing each year? We all know it's growing and it's great. What are your prognostications moving forward?

Mr CORNISH - It's a good question. I'd like to be able to answer it better than I can. We have some numbers of pretty solid growth and I think they're somewhere between 5 per cent to 10 per perhaps year-on-year in the last year. I think we still have very significant

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investment in the berry industry and that's the biggest part of our sector. That's some \$200 million production out of perhaps a total of a bit over \$300 million. It's an enormous part.

Cherries are still expanding and they're still planting. We're replanting apples. There are lots of positives. It's built on the back of having decent weather, access to irrigation and people who are committed to the industry and to growing and investing. It's not inexpensive with crop protection, irrigation, tunnels and raised beds and all those but there are lots of positives.

Mr WILLIE - I guess that's a good segue to my question in terms of biosecurity. You have biosecurity workers working on COVID-related issues. What is your understanding of the resource and is it adequate? I think I saw recently that blueberry rust had returned to the state. Could you provide a comment on that?

Mr CORNISH - No doubt we've been in discussions with Biosecurity Tasmania about that over the journey and we've been keenly putting forward the importance of that. They are very aware of that. We haven't seen any demonstrable issues in that regard which is good but it never stops.

Generally speaking, blueberry rust is a difficult problem and we have blueberry rust in the state. We have a number of infected properties already but this is an additional one and that's of concern.

We've been working with and talking to Biosecurity Tasmania and how they're responding to that. We have confidence that they have a thorough plan and comprehensive response in place that deals with the individual, the grower himself, because this is a terrible outcome for him but also about the implications for the rest of the industry. But, of course, our biggest threat remains Queensland fruit fly or perhaps but, hopefully not, Mediterranean fruit fly. We've had a good year thus far. There's a lot of work that takes place and we're working with Biosecurity Tas.

It's actually pre-border so they work very closely with Victoria and we've been certainly keen and encouraged them to work closely with the Victorians about pre-inspections before they go onto fumigation in the fumigation chambers which is really important, not just relying on the fumigation. So, try to make as strong a system that can be and we're also talking and working with them and others and industry as well about irradiation. There's a lot of parts to that but it's a very effective approach.

It's also contained with a range of trade protocols with overseas countries as well but we're looking to work out the most effective way to keep those pests and diseases out of Tassie. At this stage we've got a very good relationship with Biosecurity Tas, I must say. We meet regularly and we're involved with them in their discussions about these ones which is kind but, you know, decent but also makes sense with them and particularly on both those matters both Queensland fruit fly but also blueberry rust.

Mr WILLIE - There's no concern that there's a distraction with COVID and some of their resource might be deployed in COVID-related matters and some of the biosecurity stuff is continuing as normal? Is that your understanding?

Mr CORNISH - Yes. We haven't seen any issues that have come out of that and we've certainly been closely looking at it because we just can't afford that and they're well aware of

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that. We were fortunate in that the peak time for that really comes from about October through to March particularly when we're importing the high-risk fruits.

For that period after March last year when there was a lot of activity, thankfully, there's no need for - there isn't anywhere near as much need for the intensity of those inspections so it was probably fortunate from that point of view. But, no, this season that's through this high-risk part of the year we've been very comfortable with where they're at and what they've been doing. Fortunately, the systems have been working really well. There's a lot of pest pressure on the mainland and we've seen South Australia certainly experiencing some less favourable outcomes.

Mr WILLIE - Would Biosecurity have the capacity to deal with, say, a fruit fly incursion like previously, at the moment, given that they've got a lot of COVID duties as well?

Mr CORNISH - Yes. In any emergency you would have to - it would be an emergency. Fortunately, or unfortunately, until COVID the fruit fly outbreak was the biggest single biosecurity event in the state's history. I'm not sure whether we're comfortable that we've been overtaken by a health pandemic but we have been. We've learnt a lot since then; we learnt a lot during that. We get funding as well from the Government for biosecurity to bridge that gap and work with growers. That certainly helps. That ongoing funding is essential for us and I think for the biosecurity outcome.

We're a long way ahead where we were then but it's never-ending. The value of keeping fruit fly out for our protocol markets, it's just enormous and it's enormous just not from a Tasmanian perspective but from a national perspective because that gives us access to markets which mainlanders can't get and on the back of us getting access, they are then able to pursue access as well.

Mr WILLIE - It would be extremely difficult for Biosecurity to manage an incursion like that given that they're managing COVID at the same time? You would expect a redeployment of staff from other departments and a whole range of other things given it's an emergency situation?

Mr CORNISH - For sure and I think there was last time.

CHAIR - Probably not a question Peter could answer but if he wishes to have a go at it.

Mr CORNISH - I think there was last time as well.

Mr STREET - I think you would have a good understanding of it.

Mr CORNISH - It was an enormous response last time both from industry but also government and it was multi-faceted, like we've seen with COVID. It wasn't just from Biosecurity Tas; there were a lot of different aspects.

It's a very complicated and difficult and expensive response but the consequences of that and returning to that pest-free area freedom were very significant so we're comfortable that. We're very comfortable that the Government understands the importance and that it is -

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government has an enormously important role, and it's a core role of government in terms of biosecurity, for plant and pest diseases.

CHAIR - Thank you, Josh. If there are no other questions, Peter, thank you very much for your attendance today. Thank you very much for your opening statement. That covered off on a lot of the issues that we were concerned about and wanted to talk to you about so thank you for the way in which you've answered those questions. We appreciate that very much so thank you.

Mr CORNISH - No problems. If I could say one last thing and that is I do hope the team that's on your lanyard has another successful year.

THE WITNESS WITHDREW.