



PARLIAMENT OF TASMANIA

TRANSCRIPT

HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY

GOVERNMENT BUSINESSES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Metro Tasmania Pty Ltd

Wednesday 4 December 2024

MEMBERS

Mr Street (Chair);
Mr Behrakis MP (Deputy Chair);
Mr O'Byrne MP;
Mr Willie MP;
Mr Winter MP; and
Dr Woodruff MP

OTHER PARTICIPATING MEMBERS

Ms Brown MP;
Ms Burnet MP;
Mr Garland MP;
Mrs Beswick MP;

WITNESSES IN ATTENDANCE

Hon. Eric Abetz MP, Minister for Business, Industry and Resources, Minister for Transport

Tony Braxton-Smith, Chair

Katie Cooper, Chief Executive Officer

Jesse Penfold, General Manager – Finance

PUBLIC

The committee met at 11.34 a.m.

CHAIR - The time being after 11.30 a.m., the scrutiny for Metro Tasmania will now begin. I welcome the minister and staff, along with others at the table. The time for scrutiny is two hours. Any time for a break can't be made up, so we won't be taking a formal break, but you are welcome to avail yourself of the tea and coffee that is outside.

Members would be familiar with the practice of any questions that you want to be taken on notice need to be accepted by either the Chair or the minister, and then provided in writing to the secretary down here. I will invite the minister to make a brief opening statement and introduce those at the table with him.

Mr ABETZ - Thank you very much, Chair. On my left is Mr Tony Braxton-Smith, the chair of Metro, and the CEO, Katie Cooper, on my right. If I may make a brief opening statement, just a fun fact - 6.87 million passenger journeys were undertaken in the past year, helping many Tasmanians to get to their destination. The government has provided a range of additional supports to Metro to help attract and retain drivers and restore full service delivery as soon as possible, and I suspect there will be questions in relation to that.

Metro continues to take steps to address the shortage of drivers by actively recruiting and training bus operators. Since the start of this year, in the south over 80 trainees have commenced on the roster and another 12 are in training. Mr O'Byrne - to obviate one question for you - I can let you know that the Route 655 service in the p.m. peak that conveys workers from Oakdale Industries to the city has been restored.

I put on the record, as I did yesterday afternoon, that Deb Grace, one of our drivers in Launceston, was recently awarded the National Driver of the Year at the Bus Industry Conference held here in Hobart. We had some nominees from Metro - Kurtt Reynolds, Graham Freeman and Chris Breen in other categories. The It Is Not OK campaign launched in July 2023 addresses the growing issue of anti-social behaviour that affects both staff and customers across Metro. With that, I will leave the opening statement and await questions.

CHAIR - Thank you, minister. I will give the call to Ms Brown.

Ms BROWN - Thank you, Chair. Minister, the Premier announced on 3 November a new policy to reconsider the ownership model of all of its government businesses, including the possibility of privatisation. He has said that transport and energy businesses will be a priority. When did you become aware of the GBE review announced on 3 November?

Mr ABETZ - I will have to check the record in relation to that, but as you might imagine, these matters are the subject of discussion in other fora, which I won't divulge. Suffice to say, it is something that I think is always worthwhile considering to see how best you can deliver services to the public at the best possible benefit for the consumer and for the taxpayer.

From time to time - I don't need to remind you, Ms Brown, that your party went down a privatisation path, believing that it would provide a better model of service in various areas from banks to airlines. I think it is good and appropriate that governments do reflect and then come to a conclusion. At this stage, that is all we are doing. We are reflecting on the best possible approach.

PUBLIC

Ms BROWN - With that reflection, what engagement have you had with the government regarding the potential privatisation of Metro?

Mr ABETZ - With myself in it? At this stage, none.

Ms BROWN - Okay.

Mr ABETZ - This was just a generic, general statement that was made. Yes, we are going to look and see what the options are, but that hasn't progressed further.

Ms BROWN - Minister, will you do what the Premier wouldn't and rule out the privatisation of Metro under your watch?

Mr ABETZ - Look, these are the games that people play -

Ms BROWN - This is a serious question, actually.

Mr ABETZ - Especially in opposition. I've been there as well, Ms Brown, so I know the games that are played because you want to get the government on the sticky paper -

Ms BROWN - I just want to get a commitment.

CHAIR - Ms Brown.

Mr ABETZ - -of either ruling something in or out. I'm not going to do that. Suffice to say that we will consider what is within the best interests of the people of Tasmania and the consumer, the consumer being the travelling public.

Ms BURNET - Minister, I'm not here to play games -

Mr ABETZ - Good.

Ms BURNET - so I'm ready to have straightforward answers from the three of you.

Mr ABETZ - From straightforward questions, no doubt.

Ms BURNET - No doubt.

Ms BROWN - Mine was too, actually. Mine was very straightforward.

Ms BURNET - Over the last 16 months there's obviously been a reduction in services in Hobart. How are you getting those services back? I know you've said previously in parliament that there's a driver shortage, there's a national driver shortage. I don't want to hear that again. I wonder how you're trying to get those services back and how you're working with your federal counterparts in relation to looking at migration issues as well.

Mr ABETZ - There has been a diminution of services because of the driver shortage, as I said in my opening statement. There has been training. Thank you, brief number 30, which will tell me as well that we have had - does that tell me the number of? - I just read it out, so I'll go back to it. We have had an extra 80 trainees, and 12 are in training as we speak. There

has been a recruitment process underway. The CEO undoubtedly has more detailed information that she can rightly share in relation to that.

Metro at no stage took delight in reducing the number of routes that were covered and was very mindful of the fact that they should be restored as quickly as possible, hence the recruitment drive.

Ms COOPER - The temporary service adjustment that was installed was because of the driver shortage. I know we all don't want to hear it, but that's actually the reality of it. To try and resolve that, which I think really goes to the core of your question, is the number of actions that the business has taken. That has included the recruitment campaign that I think is pretty obvious. We've been very transparent with advertising on buses. We've also modified our training program. We've worked across industry as well. For example, we've worked with the national industry association around what are some of the industrial relations challenges that can try and resolve some of the people shortages issues. Obviously, it's bigger than a Metro issue, but we certainly actively contribute in that space.

Pleasingly, we have been able to start to cautiously and responsibly restore services when we've got absolute confidence in the reliability and certainty of being able to bring it in, because that's the bit our customers have absolutely advised to us is incredibly important. That's what drives, quite honestly, patronage.

Ms BURNET - In relation to the issue around visas and migration, have you had any conversations with your federal counterpart, minister?

Mr ABETZ - No, I haven't.

Ms BURNET - Are you likely to?

Mr ABETZ - I had not thought of that. There are certain visa requirements that apply. I understand - and the CEO or chair will correct me if I'm wrong in this regard, but I understand Metro does have the capacity to attract certain migrants who gain points for being in a regional area. All of Tasmania is a regional area. Unfortunately, there has been some reaction of antisocial behaviour towards some of our drivers who are from an ethnicity other than Anglo-Saxon, but we rely on them and we are most appreciative of them being willing to drive our buses.

If you'll just bear with me for a moment. I think I did raise it in the parliament that I came up with an idea that might be a good or bad idea. We'll wait and see what happens. Metro is in discussions with the Department of State Growth, at the licensing department. I stumbled across the fact that to be a Metro driver you need a heavy rigid licence and that requires a driver's licence for two years, but that's only required for the articulated buses. Medium would allow you to drive the, can I use the term, ordinary buses, the non-articulated buses. For that you only need a one-year driver's licence. And so, I put to Metro the possibility of seeing what can be done to encourage drivers that might just qualify for the medium rather than the heavy licence to be able to drive the non-articulated buses.

You can be assured that myself but, more importantly, the board and the management have been looking to get as many drivers as possible and fill that void. For what it's worth, that

PUBLIC

was the ministerial distraction that I threw into the mix as well. Whether it's going to have legs or not, I don't know.

Ms COOPER - I can expand on that slightly if you like, just from another area.

CHAIR - Very briefly.

Ms COOPER - One of the other is, obviously, the recruitment of bringing staff in. But the other action that Metro has been focusing on very strongly is retention, and that's obviously where we've had some great progress.

Mr O'BYRNE - In relation to the driver shortage, the Tasmanian labour market plays a little bit differently than the national one because we're an island and people don't necessarily move around as freely as they do on the mainland. Just to broadly state that, 'oh well, there's a national shortage and we suffer from that'. It seems that you're sending the message, by virtue of how you're treating operators and staff, that you're not really welcome here. Of all the GBEs, we're constantly seeing industrial action from mechanics and bus operators. In one breath you say 'We desperately need staff' but, all of a sudden, you're forcing them to take industrial action to try and fight for a fair wage. Can you see the contradiction between 'We value our staff, but we're going to essentially' - How long did it take the mechanics' agreement to get resolved? Close to two years?

Mr ABETZ - Well, it's been resolved, which is good news.

Mr O'BYRNE - I understand it's been resolved, and I acknowledge your role in that, minister. However, we've got bus operators taking industrial action.

CHAIR - I need you to come to a question, Mr O'Byrne.

Mr O'BYRNE - How can you say you're trying to attract workers to Metro Tasmania when all the people see is industrial action because people are unhappy?

Mr ABETZ - I would disagree with all that people see is industrial action. That is part and parcel of the industrial framework in this country that you try to come to a resolution and then people either threaten or actually do take industrial action. And then some join in, some don't, some of the workers do, some of the workers don't. So, to sort of classify them all in a particular category would, I think, be wrong and not necessarily reflect the mood in the workforce.

One thing I have taken some guidance from is from a former Labor premier, who said it would be irresponsible for a minister to insert themselves. As it happened, it related to Metro industrial action during, I think, a ministry that you were part of. And the speculation, interestingly enough, was that the O'Byrnes may have been of a different view to the premier at that time, but that's just a little aside.

Mr O'BYRNE - That's a bit of history. Can we deal with today?

Mr ABETZ - Yeah, bit of history, yeah.

CHAIR - Is there another question from the independents before I come back to the -

PUBLIC

Mr ABETZ - So, my answer is I will not directly involve myself.

Mr O'BYRNE - Do you accept the fact that if you're trying to attract staff to a company, when they see a high level of industrial action - and a lot of operators were engaged in that action and on the streets in Launceston and Hobart, that doesn't send a good message, does it?

Mr ABETZ - I'll let the CEO provide some more detail.

Ms COOPER - I probably don't necessarily agree with the statement that all the staff are involved. Across - if I talk about our bus operator that's had recent industrial action, and of the eligible staff that were members and able to take it, about a third took it. The majority of the staff weren't actually taking action. That's probably a slightly different perspective.

Mr O'BYRNE - Not everyone works every day.

Ms COOPER - No, that was from the staff that were eligible to take the action on that environment. From our numbers of people that were eligible to take the action, only about a third had been involved. It's actually been the minor percentage, not the high percentage.

With your question around employee engagement, the other bit I'd just draw to members' attention is, from the engagement surveys that Metro's conducted, our engagement and our performance with staff satisfaction in the workplace is actually growing. If we look at it over the past few years, our employment engagement surveys are showing a positive result about the culture building and becoming somewhere more that people want to work.

Mr O'BYRNE - Would you share those surveys with the committee?

Ms COOPER - I don't have an issue with that, but it is not up to me.

Mr ABETZ - If management's happy, I'm happy.

CHAIR - It needs to be tabled by either the minister or -

Mr ABETZ - We'll take it on notice.

Ms COOPER - It is an electronic system, so we need to print you out some summaries. It's an online system.

Mr ABETZ - We'll take it on notice to table.

Mr GARLAND - According to your annual report, patronage levels declined with total first boardings 1.7 per cent lower than the prior year - 6.88 million in 2023-24 compared to 6.99 million in 2022-23 - resulting in ticket revenue being \$287,000 below the prior year. What do you think is responsible for this trend and what government initiatives would you like to see to boost passenger numbers?

Mr ABETZ - That's a very detailed question and one that has exercised our mind considerably. Half-price bus fares was designed more as a cost-of-living measure, but we're also observing what that does for passenger numbers. I think - and correct me - in your

electorate of Braddon, the Burnie Metro hub has seen an increase in passenger numbers, not so in Launceston and the greater Hobart area. If I recall statistics, the full fare adult journeys decreased by 2.5 per cent. Adult concession journeys increased by 4.3 per cent. Interestingly, student journeys decreased by 7.9 per cent.

We can reflect. We don't have detailed information on this. More people after COVID are now working from home and therefore not catching the buses much. Students are studying from home more and not catching the bus. We don't really have information on that, but we do have a bit of an expert sitting on my left who is across that sort of detail, I think Australia-wide.

Mr BRAXTON-SMITH - Nationally, yes.

Mr ABETZ - I may, I'll refer.

Mr BRAXTON-SMITH - There's been a study done by a public transport advisory firm by the name of LEK which looks at patronage shifts post COVID across Australia and New Zealand. In general what they found was that if you look at the eastern seaboard - Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane and even Auckland - patronage has recovered on public transport to somewhere around 80-something per cent of pre-COVID journeys.

In addition to which, it now has been a shift, and it's generally attributed to the shift in work choices and, I used the word lifestyle yesterday, but work and life choices about working flexibly from home and/or studying from home, et cetera. The other thing that's occurred is that, particularly in the more population-dense cities, patronage has increased most on the weekend, so Saturdays are actually now the busiest days on the network and the only day where patronage is at its pre-COVID level in those cities. Therefore in the weekdays, the commute days, it's generally a little bit lower than the average would suggest.

It's something that is a trend both around Australia and New Zealand and in other jurisdictions elsewhere in the world. We're seeing and experiencing that here.

Ms BROWN - I want to have a chat about some hydrogen buses. I appreciate that you touched on this yesterday. I would like to know when the buses were stored at the Glenorchy depot. How long have they been sitting idle for?

Ms COOPER - I think you mean Moonah.

Ms BROWN - Moonah, sorry.

Mr ABETZ - No, Derwent Park.

Ms BROWN - Well, it is on the fringe.

Mr ABETZ - I suppose it is the Glenorchy municipality, so technically you are right in any event.

Ms BROWN - It is on the fringe.

Ms BURNET - It was called Springfield in the *Hansard* yesterday.

PUBLIC

Ms COOPER - As for the exact date, I couldn't tell you, but we have had them there for a couple of months and we expect - and we have been doing pre-operational testing. They have gone through their commissioning dates so that they can be accepted.

Mr O'BYRNE - Didn't consider taking them to Leith?

Mr BRAXTON-SMITH - If I might just jump in, they haven't been sitting idle, because they have actually been through testing and commissioning. When we receive buses, we can't put them into service straight away. We need to go through some rigorous checks to ensure that they meet with all the compliance, so that they comply with the contract.

Ms BROWN - And build a refuelling station, I assume.

Mr BRAXTON-SMITH - Well, the project was always going to run in three parts. One, the buses. Two, the refuelling station. Three, the supply of hydrogen. As with any project that has three different work streams, they don't all coincide on a single date to enable services to go operational. The critical path here was more the supply of hydrogen than the building of the depot - that would be the second critical path - and the buses are procured as kind of a completed built unit from a Chinese supplier called Photon. That was always going to be the shortest duration when we said - when the board authorised everyone to proceed.

Ms BROWN - But then you started with the buses first? If they -

Mr BRAXTON-SMITH - We received the buses first, yes, and the building of the hydrogen station. We received the buses. They need testing. They need for the maintenance mechanics to be actually trained in the skills that are required to maintain them because they have different componentry and different drive trains. Until such time as they understand maintenance routines and are competent to do that, they can't be operated.

The building of the hydrogen refuelling station out at Mornington had a dependency on council approvals, which are obviously not in our hands. They need to go through a rigorous assurance process so that we can be confident in the safety of the system to operate. All of that has proceeded according to plan. Mornington Depot reached practical completion earlier this week, and we are looking to CRC Blue Economy, or Blue Economy CRE -

Ms COOPER - Blue Economy CRC.

Mr BRAXTON-SMITH - Yes, Blue Economy CRC to complete their arrangements for hydrogen supply.

Ms BROWN - You just spoke about upskilling the mechanics. Have they received that training for the hydrogen buses?

Mr BRAXTON-SMITH - I will hand over to Katie.

Ms COOPER - Our staff have received training for hydrogen buses from the supplier and some of our team have gone to Sydney to meet with the manufacturer when they came through from Sydney. Our staff have received training for both battery electric and hydrogen. There is no real hydrogen course available at the moment because it is such emerging tech. We

have done work with our manufacturer and some of our staff have undergone that training as well.

Ms BROWN - That hybrid training, is that an accredited training?

Ms COOPER - My understanding is there isn't any accredited training in the market at the moment. What we have done - and I can tell you what they have actually completed because we have undertaken training. Bear with me and I'll pull the names up.

For zero-emission bus training that has commenced, we have had seven of our engineering employees complete the zero-emission battery electric servicing skills through TAFE, and that was at Bendigo TAFE, because that is where it is operated and offering. Fifteen of our employees have received the familiarisation training on the Photon hydrogen bus from Photon. We have had 14 of our other employees receive battery electric overview training; 24 of our employees have received battery electric familiarisation and charger training; 35 of our employees have so far received the battery electric driver training; 19 have received the hydrogen electric battery operator familiarisation training; and seven employees have received the hydrogen electric bus driver training, at this stage.

Ms BURNET - Minister, more questions on the zero-emissions bus trial. I am interested to know, given transport is one of the biggest emitters for greenhouse gas emissions - apart from forestry, of course.

Mr ABETZ - That's wrong.

Ms BURNET - We don't need to go into that. Regarding transport emissions, what are the plans to make moving the rest of the fleet to zero emissions vehicles while the trial is underway? What's the overall time span of reducing emissions?

Mr ABETZ - With reducing emissions, I'll be guided possibly by the CEO, but I think we've just got 106 buses, is it?

Ms COOPER - A few more, 118.

Mr ABETZ - There we go - that reduce their carbon and particulate emissions by quite a substantial percentage. That is a substantial improvement, if I might say, but a trial is a trial. The learnings, to use that terrible word, the information we obtain from that trial, will help guide us as to the future.

Ms BURNET - Further to that, what proportion of the bus fleet can be converted to electric or hydrogen buses and what are you going to do with that ageing part of your fleet?

Mr ABETZ - I'll refer to the chair.

Mr BRAXTON-SMITH - Thank you, minister. To my knowledge and understanding, there is no commonly used method of converting any diesel bus to an electric unit. They're engineered differently, so the industry typically replaces them at the end of the bus's service life.

PUBLIC

Ms COOPER - If I can just add into that, just to expand slightly, part of the trial is to do a tabletop exercise to see if it is possible to do a conversion. That is one of the requirements of the project charter.

Mr BRAXTON-SMITH - There you go. I speak from experience, having done it in two jurisdictions previously.

Mr BEHRAKIS - Minister, a number of constituents who have heard the common ticketing announcement have asked whether or not they'll be able to continue using their GreenCard when it's implemented and if not, what will happen to their remaining GreenCard balance.

Mr O'BYRNE - They'll have plenty of years to use it. It's a long way away.

Mr ABETZ - That's your prediction. Thank you for that. That's on the record. Common ticketing is something that has been very welcome. It's been some time in its gestation. The reason is that these things are difficult to roll out. We are pleased that we are able to piggyback off the Queensland government's rollout. That has provided us with substantial savings. I think the cost is about \$35.4 million. The ACT has gone through a similar exercise and I think is still having hiccups after expanding \$70 million. That shows you how you can burn money with these things and that is why we have taken some time in coming to a contractual arrangement.

We are hoping that 2026 will be the year it will be delivered. Work is progressing in relation to the GreenCard and the systems that are coming to the end of life. As I understand it, you can have a maximum of \$500, as we discovered the other day, on your GreenCard. We would encourage people to run that down. At the end of the day, you can take your GreenCard into a Metro shop and cash it out, should you wish, or have the funds transferred. The new system will not allow the GreenCard.

Mr O'BYRNE - In relation to operators and obviously the retention issue that you refer to, I notice in the evidence you provided in the other place yesterday that in terms of your exit surveys, sometimes these aren't exact sciences, but people give a number of reasons why they leave. Of the people who left, 24 per cent was because of the working conditions, 13 per cent left because of the remuneration and 24 per cent left for career opportunities - obviously they were being offered something better elsewhere. Doesn't that indicate that whilst you seem to be able to recruit them, they're leaving for the reasons why people are going on strike?

Mr ABETZ - I wouldn't necessarily put the two together.

Mr O'BYRNE - It's not much of a jump

Mr ABETZ - I think there is also a relatively high turnover. As I understand it, the turnover is for a number of reasons, but when it comes to remuneration, Metro provides the highest in the state, therefore the remuneration factor cannot be seen as one of the motivators for people leaving, other than they found another job, not bus driving, which pays more. There isn't, as I understand it, a wholesale switch from Metro drivers to taxi driving or to Tassie Link or something like that.

Mr O'BYRNE - In one breath you say the market's the problem, we can't attract them, but then when they identify market-related issues, not necessarily other companies, but when

PUBLIC

they identify market-related issues as the reason for leaving, you can't have it both ways. You can't save the market is x but it's actually y.

Mr ABETZ - We could pay a huge amount of money and potentially keep every driver, but then the taxpayers' support for Metro would have to be substantially increased, and that would also get out of whack completely the remuneration paid to private operators. They're the sort of balancing things. What we need to do is compare driver remuneration within the same category or band of employment, and if we do that, Metro is, as I understand it, on top as we speak.

Ms BROWN - I'm also going to be talking about the exit surveys, and I appreciate that you did provide some numbers yesterday. Can you give me a gendered breakdown of exit interviews and surveys that have been rolled out?

Ms COOPER - Not on hand. I might need to check if we can do that. I'm not sure if we divide it by gender, but I can take it on notice to see what we can locate for you.

Ms BROWN - You also said that yesterday it was difficult to have exit surveys and interviews with drivers. Why is that?

Ms COOPER - It's just basically comes down to numbers and times of shifts. We do them sometimes and we don't do them sometimes. It's a voluntary thing by the employee whether or not they choose to partake. As you can imagine, in a corporate environment, from Monday to Friday you'd see your manager a lot more easily than perhaps if you're finishing work on a Sunday at two o'clock in the afternoon and the manager might not be there on your final day. Sometimes we do it earlier but it's a choice whether they choose to. The logistics of it are slightly different in a shift work environment versus a day work environment.

Ms BROWN - You said that the exit surveys are sent via email. When do you send the email and when does an employee lose access to their Metro email?

Ms COOPER - I would need to check that with our people team to get the exact time.

Ms BURNET - Minister, Metro services join up with many other bus services. There are school bus runs, Tassie Link, various others. Has the government and Metro ever considered how to be more effective in utilising and dovetailing these services?

Mr ABETZ - I have mentioned that from time to time, especially with the ferry services. I will allow the CEO or chair to answer the complications that are associated.

Mr BRAXTON-SMITH - Thank you, minister.

Mr ABETZ - I'm not sure you do.

Mr BRAXTON-SMITH - Complications with service integration?

Mr ABETZ - Yes.

Mr BRAXTON-SMITH - Service integration obviously helps customers with their connecting services. In our case, it is a role for the Department of State Growth to think about

PUBLIC

the network and the connecting services. We certainly would encourage them, because they're good for patronage and better for customers, but that really is a question that's best directed to DSG.

Mr ABETZ - I think they're currently undertaking a study on that.

Ms BURNET - Is that right? Okay, I'll be interested to see that.

Mr ABETZ - Wait a minute, no they're not.

Ms BURNET - Suddenly cancelled?

Mr ABETZ - Sorry, the Greater Hobart Network Review.

Ms BURNET - You mentioned ferries. Again, going to that core issue even within Metro with ferries and the Bellerive terminus, my understanding is that there are no connected bus services from Bellerive to places like Rosny, which would make sense to my mind, but what are you doing to address that?

Mr ABETZ - That is all part and parcel of the greater Hobart network, and I, for one, am encouraging for that, if at all possible financially, et cetera, to take place. We are seeing what can be done in that space.

Mr O'BYRNE - An extension on our last exchange - no one's asking for a blank cheque for bus operators or bus staff, and to suggest so is probably not very respectful of what we're trying to do here. Minister, with respect, your job is to deliver a public service and a public transport service is crucial for Tasmanians. You are still - and I don't know how you can say it - calling the cancellations of last year temporary. They're clearly not temporary because they're ongoing and they're now permanent. Effectively, people have backed them in.

Minister, your job is to deliver a public service system that is functioning and that can get people around their communities. When I ask questions around wages and conditions, when people have identified it as an issue, it's fundamental to you fixing the public transport system. What are you doing to fix the public transport system?

Mr ABETZ - With the public transport system, there are a number of issues that I could potentially address, bus tracking, common ticketing, those sorts of things - getting a proper transit centre in Launceston, et cetera. They are all part and parcel of trying to make public transport more accessible, more enjoyable and more consumer friendly. Certainty and reliability of service is one of the key factors, and that is why, since I became minister, I have been exercised along with the chair and management of Metro to try to restore services. Whilst they were called temporary before I took the chair, I think it'd be fair to say that it was the genuine hope that they would be more temporary than they are now, if that is terminology that doesn't do too much damage to English grammar.

Mr O'BYRNE - It offends the ears.

Mr ABETZ - It has continued for a lot longer than is desirable or wanted.

PUBLIC

Mr BRAXTON-SMITH - Minister, just quickly if I may, just to place on the record, we have returned the first 26 of those services to duty - 26 of 177 - and we have applied diligently what you would call the 80:20 rule with that. In other words, we've looked at the services where there will be the highest demand or the highest transport need and sought to prioritise those.

We've consulted very carefully with the Department of State Growth on that, and we've looked at the most important corridors and those where there are less frequent services, in other words, larger service gap times between the two services, particularly in peak periods. Those services have been restored, and whilst it's 26, those are the ones that on our assessment will have the most benefit to customers.

We have wanted to get back to serving much sooner than we've been able to, for circumstances that the management team has worked very hard on and that, as board, we've been particularly vigilant about over the course of the year in fixing the underlying systems that actually get us to a better position.

Mr O'BYRNE - Do you still call them temporary?

CHAIR - The call is now with Mr Garland.

Mr GARLAND - What's the preliminary feedback from the electric bus trial in Launceston?

Ms COOPER - The electric bus trial has had some challenges. The way I'd describe it is that the buses that we had delivered in December, we had some concerns with the quality from the manufacturing point of view as to what we'd received. We didn't accept them until the middle of the year from a contractual point of view because we were quite frankly wanting to get the quality that we had paid for. We've done that, and we have subsequently still had some challenges with the quality of that build, which we've been managing in line with the contract.

I am pleased to say that we now have three of those four buses in service - the normal revenue service. It's taken a lot longer than we would like, but at the same time I wasn't prepared to accept something that we didn't feel met the contract obligations that we'd paid for.

Mr ABETZ - One of those factors was disability, wasn't it?

Ms COOPER - Yes, but we've solved that.

Mr ABETZ - Which has now been resolved. They were not disability compliant, which we thought was an important factor.

Ms BROWN - On the electric buses, can you advise of the other faults with the three out of four?

Ms COOPER - I can use my language; I'm not a technical mechanic. My mechanical team are probably going to laugh at me, but essentially, one of the major issues we've been having has been incredibly noisy suspension on three of the four buses - that sort of grinding noise of it. Some of it went up as high as over 85 decibels, so we're talking incredibly loud. That part has subsequently been rectified by the manufacturer; they provided a replacement part and that has resolved that. That was probably one of the most significant issues.

We have some other defects that were more minor. We've got a compressor issue that had a noise issue, but we put that in service; that hasn't been resolved. We had the DDA issue that was being referred to. There are some minor niggles and things, but they're issues that wouldn't necessarily prevent it going on service. The main issues that we've had with the service - we have early indications and three out of the four are back on.

Ms BROWN - To be absolutely clear, you did not accept those buses with those faults?

Ms COOPER - There's a contractual space of how we go through it. That's my terminology. The buses were delivered in December. We had to go through an acceptance process, and we didn't accept them until the middle of the year. We put them in service and then we had some further issues identified. We took them out of service so that we could work through those issues with the manufacturer, being Custom Denning in Sydney. Custom Denning's response was probably slower in time than we would like, but they have come down and subsequently replaced those parts and we now have them back in service, which has been positive.

Ms BROWN - Who paid for those buses to be fixed?

Ms COOPER - Custom Denning.

Ms BURNET - Minister, in your member statement of expectations - in 3.3 under other activities, it says, 'Metro Tasmania has received approval from the members to undertake the following other activities' and the first one is the provision of 'passenger services in non-urban areas'. The structure, as with many structures of pricing, is that those who live in areas further from the centre of a city will pay more. The concern that I have is that when people live further away, they may be on lower incomes, and it's not equitable in that sense just because they're travelling further on the bus. It's not necessarily a choice anymore. I'm just wondering how you can alter those fares so that there's a better fare parity for those commuters?

Mr ABETZ - That's a good question. I know the half-price bus fares have been particularly well received in areas where there is a greater bus fee payable. Tassielink have indicated to me that they have seen a welcome response from their clientele in relation to that, but I suppose it's one of those difficult issues - people on a lower income who drive their own car will, of necessity, spend more money on petrol to get to and from. Often in regional areas you have lower property values, therefore lower mortgage, lower rates et cetera. Trying to combine it all together in cost of living, you can pick out one element and say why is it fair that somebody pays lower rates in Huonville compared to Kingston or whatever -

Ms BURNET - I'm just talking about us bus commuters.

Mr ABETZ - Yes, but I'm sort of saying that when you put it all into the mix, there are always the positives and negatives and there's no doubt that the further away you live from a city centre and you desire to get to that city centre, it will cost you more, be it by private or public transport. Is that a desirable outcome? No, it's not, and I dare say all of us would want everything to be free in this world, but it doesn't operate like that.

PUBLIC

Ms BURNET - I suppose ideally, we want a greater uptake of bus transport if possible, and if that were a cheaper and fairer alternative to those living in inner-city suburbs as well as outer suburbs, why should there be that disadvantage, in effect?

Mr ABETZ - In public transport studies - and correct me if I'm wrong, chair - reliability and certainty seem to be a lot more important than a price indicator.

Ms BURNET - That's got nothing to do with it really, has it?

Mr ABETZ - It does, because what people want is reliability and certainty and price is a factor but it's not the dominant factor.

Mr BEHRAKIS - Minister, I understand that there's been a delay in the rollout of the security screens. Are you able to advise what has caused these delays and where the project is at currently?

Mr ABETZ - Metro developed a number of prototypes in varying designs as a result of driver feedback, including a perspex design, a mesh design and a toughened glass full-screen design. Metro Tasmania's protective partitions, or safety screens, initially undertook a four-month trial of three prototypes in Burnie, Launceston and Hobart. The compilation of feedback from bus operators involved 137 bus operators who are completing feedback forms, with 94 specific pieces of individual feedback. This is an example of Metro management deliberately involving and engaging with their workforce to ensure that the best possible safety device is to be implemented and Metro's internal working group are meeting and continuing to investigate options. What's the latest, CEO?

Ms COOPER - The latest is that we are very close to what we think is the finalised prototype. It's actually a lot more complex than probably sounds from the initial stages, particularly because it's a screen that's on a moving heavy vehicle that needs to meet the safety requirements for a vehicle on road, but additionally what we discovered with the initial prototypes we had was that there was unintended consequences of significant reflection or blindspotting by the actual screen on the bus and that obviously is a significant concern.

The prototype that we've got at the moment, we think we're very close to; in fact, we just tried a concave mirror to try to change one of the reflection issues we're having in the north that proved to still be a problem and we're now trying a digital mirror. We're trying to make sure we minimise any of the unintended consequences of that safety risk. There is a very strong desire and a level of urgency we're trying to resolve, but at the same time we don't want to do it and then create further problems.

The team have been really active and I'm really proud of the work they've done to try to find the right solution. Last week we also had the bus industry conference down here in Hobart. We had their technical expert come down and review our process and review our screen and pleasingly got really positive feedback from him that we're going to be in a really good space by the process we followed, but also the screen itself to help them draft what some of the new regulations are or the guidance material. I'm not sure how they're legislatively framing it but we're well placed in that space. We are incredibly active in this space because we think it's important, but we also think it's important we get it right.

Mr ABETZ - If we may quickly interpose, we have an answer on gender.

PUBLIC

Ms COOPER - As to the gender breakdown of exit surveys, 73 per cent are male, 22 per cent are female and 5 per cent have not specified, which is not that different, to be honest, with our actual gender split.

Ms BROWN - Are you able to provide that in employment type as well?

Ms COOPER - As in whether they're part-time or full-time?

Ms BROWN - Which ones are drivers, which ones are admin staff, which ones are mechanics?

Ms COOPER - Again, I will check.

Mr O'BYRNE - I will go back to the issue around bus operators and staffing, because I think your report said the patronage is at 81 per cent of pre-pandemic levels. There are less people on buses and you have consistently said the key - if there is a silver bullet - is getting more bus operators. Obviously, having part-time operators and a flexible workplace is important. People's lives ebb and flow. You get them in, you get them trained and that costs money. I have been informed that you are now making a decision that unless people commit to a minimum of 16 hours you won't be continuing their employment. I was concerned about that, so I felt I should ask the question. Is it true that unless casual operators commit to 16 hours or more, you are basically saying there is no work for them?

Ms COOPER - No.

Mr O'BYRNE - That's not the case?

Ms COOPER - I've not heard that.

Mr O'BYRNE - I've heard that from employees.

Mr BRAXTON-SMITH - We'll need to take it on notice to see if there's been anything, but I'm not aware of a minimum hours requirement for casuals.

Ms COOPER - I've never heard of that.

Mr BRAXTON-SMITH - In the enterprise agreement, our current focus in our negotiations is around creating more flexibility around part-time and that flexibility is specifically designed for those full-time employees who want to stay with the company but because of the restriction on part-time are unable to work in the current EBA in the way they would like. That is one of the points that Metro is putting on the table that has been well received by the workforce. That is definitely in conversation, but I'm not aware of any points that have been made about minimum hours requirements for casuals, but we'll take it on notice.

Ms COOPER - Not for casuals, because that's the point of casual.

Ms O'BYRNE - Hence my question. I was quite surprised by that because that would be counterintuitive.

Ms COOPER - Yes.

CHAIR - Do you want to provide that question on notice?

Mr O'BYRNE - If they can answer before the end of the hearing.

Mr ABETZ - I appreciate that it was a question and not an allegation.

Mr O'BYRNE - No, no, no. I heard it and it concerned me.

Mr ABETZ - Exactly, I appreciate that.

Mrs BESWICK - I know that the ministerial charter says you must adhere to the terms of service contracts of the DSG. Obviously, we have had quite a few routes out of service, so does that mean you have broken your contracts with the DSG and are those contracts at risk?

Mr BRAXTON-SMITH - The simple answer is no, we are not in breach. There is a contract mechanism that provides for a reduction in payment for any service not delivered, whether it is through the planned service reductions - I will continue to use the term that is used within the organisation, the temporary service reductions. If you look at the annual report, you'll see that our service payments from DSG decreased by over \$2 million in the last year. That was specifically attributable to the working of the mechanism of the contract that makes adjustment for services not delivered, whether they are, as in the case of the TSAs, structural and ongoing, or whether it is a dropped trip because we had issues with workforce availability on a day.

Ms BROWN - Minister, you have spoken in support of critical incident leave for drivers post-incident during the budget Estimates hearing and cited the incident with the driver with a rock thrown through the windscreen on the passenger side. However, the current EBA from Metro will only be accessible for fatalities. What conversations have you had with Metro around the critical incident leave? Your comments would suggest that you believe it should extend further beyond fatalities, as you have cited previously. Are you now backing down from that support?

Mr ABETZ - I suppose it's a question of use of language within the EBA. Unbeknownst to me at the time, 'critical incident' had a specific definition. If somebody, like the driver with whom I had a cup of coffee, had a rock come through the front windscreen on the passenger side of his bus - he was provided leave. I'll allow the CEO to provide greater detail. Metro does look after its workforce after certain incidents. I'll allow the CEO or the chair to explain further.

Mr BRAXTON-SMITH - I might just hand to the chief executive, because you're dealing with the day to day.

Ms COOPER - Critical incident leave is not something that's traditionally available in the bus world. To my knowledge there's no other bus operator that offers a critical incident leave in Australia.

Critical incident leave in public transport with regards to rail is something that's been brought in and is usually used for - I'm trying to think of the right word - self-harm or for incidents that obviously are fatalities or suicide events.

There has been a request for Metro to do it. The definition that has been provided to us on the original log of claims from the union was incredibly broad and much broader than that. We are currently in negotiation. I'm going to be very clear that we're in good faith bargaining at the moment. I'm going to be careful about what I say so I don't compromise that. It is currently a point of negotiation between us and the unions, but there is some important context on that in the background.

Ms BROWN - Are you able to provide a breakdown of staff that are on workers compensation and stress leave, and what the causes are?

Ms COOPER - I can probably give you, not by the individual, but I can give you some overall numbers.

Ms BROWN - Or overall.

Ms COOPER - Let me just pull those up for you.

Mr BRAXTON-SMITH - Is your question about who's currently on leave today for each of those causes, or are you looking for some general numbers about workers compensation, for instance, the last 12 months?

Ms BROWN - Maybe in the last 12 months?

Mr BRAXTON-SMITH - Those we've got.

Ms COOPER - If you're happy, I'll read those out. I'll do year to date and last year.

For year to date as far as - these are for workers compensation claims, there have been claims for nine physical and 11 psychological. That's a total of 20, which is year to date. From 2023 to 2024, the physical claims were 26 and psychological claims were 23.

Ms BROWN - Stress leave? Do you have those?

Ms COOPER - We put that under psychological.

Ms BROWN - Sure. Absolutely.

Ms BURNET - Minister, in July, there were quite a number of media releases in relation to transport. One of them was around real-time tracking. I'm just curious to know when that is likely to land in the first instance.

Mr ABETZ - The Lord Mayor took to social media asking exactly that question. I believe a staff member may have responded on my behalf asking her to watch this space. We indicated that it would be December this year. I think that is still on track to occur.

Ms BURNET - In the same month, you announced that you wanted to bring the bus rapid transit live. I think the cost pre-COVID was around \$445 million to deliver such a project. How is that interfacing -

PUBLIC

Mr ABETZ - Sorry, which project?

Ms BURNET - The bus rapid transit project.

Mr ABETZ - Common ticketing?

Mr ABETZ - No. Bus rapid transit.

Mr ABETZ - Right.

Ms BURNET - I'm just wondering how that would interface with Metro.

Mr ABETZ - That is a question for Estimates with DSG rather than with Metro.

Ms BURNET - The question is around interfacing. We have a public transport system now. How would that interface?

Mr ABETZ - That is a DSG Estimates question, not a question for Metro. Metro are not part and parcel of that.

Ms BURNET - It was just an empty announcement in July?

Mr ABETZ - No, not at all. Just because you've asked a question at the wrong forum doesn't allow you to make that sort of allegation.

Ms BURNET - It is impossible to get that right, minister.

Mr O'BYRNE - I want to talk about the driver experience. For operators, it can be very tough, and I've been on the public record talking about the safety of operators. The transit officers, as they have been called for quite a period of time, are now in place. I'll go to the details about that later. I know that's a DSG question and I wouldn't want to ask in the wrong forum, minister.

In relation to some of the experiences of operators, for example, fare evaders and when people are reluctant to pay their fare, I've had an experience shared where one of the drivers basically forced someone to pay and made them pay, but they've now been the subject of disciplinary action. Could you confirm whether that's happened or not?

I don't want to go into the specific details of the individual, but the mere fact that I've been told that may have happened concerns me that in one respect you're saying, 'Let's get the operators the support they need', but when they take action to have someone pay a fare, they've now had industrial action taken against them. You would think that's counter -

Mr ABETZ - Good question. I don't know the answer. CEO, do you have an insight?

Ms COOPER - Not on that specific situation, but we certainly have a code of conduct that we expect our staff to follow. I'd need to take that question on notice to understand what all the circumstances were of the individual.

PUBLIC

Mr O'BYRNE - I've been told that it was a driver that asked a passenger to pay during an attempt to fare evade.

Ms COOPER - Again, there's a number of ways things can be asked for. It depends on the circumstances and that would be depending on what - if that occurred, there would have been an investigation run by the leadership of that area and also with human resources. I'd need to take it on notice to understand.

Mr O'BYRNE - You are not aware of any case where that's happened?

Ms COOPER - I don't know a name or anything. There's not enough detail for me to say I don't know about it. If there's been a disciplinary procedure to a certain level, it's dealt with it at a management level. If it becomes a termination, I would certainly become involved. Nothing you've said rings a bell to me, but that doesn't mean I don't know about it in a different context or have differing information around the surrounds.

Mr O'BYRNE - Not asking for specifics, but can you understand the context where drivers and operators are in a tough environment and then when they feel like they're doing the right thing by the company - if it happened, and I don't disbelieve this person. If it's happening, obviously that's counter to what you're trying to do to support operators and drivers.

Mr BRAXTON-SMITH - Well, I just wanted to add that over the course of the recent past, we have invested substantially in providing clear training and guidance to drivers and other workforce, both about what is acceptable code of conduct and what we expect of our customers - we've been quite clear on that in our communications campaigns - but we do also set requirements for the way that drivers conduct themselves in handling customers. They've all been trained in what we call de-escalation techniques, which are a common process now in public transport to ensure that the engagement between customers and engagement with customers by our drivers stays within acceptable boundaries.

The circumstances you're describing there, as Katie says, would be viewed on the basis of what allegations were made by the customer to our complaint line and an investigation by a manager or supervisor responsible. They would act in accordance with exercising their judgement about what happened in that interaction. If the CCTV is available then it will be reviewed as well just to check and test that. In essence, you're asking about an interaction between two humans on a bus, and it's difficult to say, as a policy position, what's appropriate or not appropriate. It will be within those boundaries.

Mr ABETZ - Can I quickly make the offer, should you wish to provide further detail offline with dates or something like that so it's easier to identify for Metro, that might be helpful.

Ms BROWN - According to the 2023-24 annual report, 15 per cent of employees are women. Are you able to break down that 15 per cent by occupation?

Ms COOPER - I will have it in the office. I don't have it in front of me today.

Ms BROWN - So you'll take that on notice? Will you also take on notice the geographic location?

PUBLIC

Ms COOPER - Yes, we know where the staff are. In the three locations?

Ms BROWN - Yes.

Ms COOPER - Yes.

Ms BROWN - Great. Within this industry, you've said many times that there is a driver shortage. What initiatives has Metro taken to attract, recruit and retain female drivers to Metro?

Ms COOPER - The idea of diversity inclusion is something we believe in really strongly. I think the reality is we're trying to get the right people into Metro. So, the gender, I would love to have more women, I'm actively involved in that space. Unfortunately - well, not unfortunately, we're happy to have men as well. We are really looking for the right person that can provide great customer service, that can drive safely, and that's really what we've been targeting to try and, as we've referred to, the temporary service adjustment. We've been looking for the right people to come on board, to actually attract them to Metro and to retain them here.

Mr BRAXTON-SMITH - You asked about a specific initiative. If you refer to the recent videos that we produced that we distributed, we were very deliberate in making sure that we showed a balanced workforce, and we showed, you know, some of our star drivers who are females in their work location talking about what they enjoy about the job as one of the means of trying to highlight the attractiveness of a driving career to females who might be looking for a new occupation.

Mr ABETZ - And, hopefully, you will be able to use the national award winner with grace.

Mr BEHRAKIS - As the largest provider of bus services in the state, we know how important Metro is in delivering an essential service for Tasmanians. With yesterday being the International Day of People with Disability, can you please outline to the committee how Metro is improving access for those with a disability?

Mr ABETZ - Metro reviewed its previous Disability Action Plan and released an expanded accessibility and inclusion plan in May 2024. The plan outlines the steps Metro will take to ensure all of its services provide a safe and respectful space for all Tasmanians. As was indicated, albeit a small element but, nevertheless, an element of the electric buses, they were found not to be disability-compliant so adjustments were made. So, that is in the mind of Metro and Metro consciousness. I understand Metro's began implementing action items from the new plan in line with the established frameworks. Do you want to expand on that, CEO?

Ms COOPER - No, I think you've covered it quite well.

Ms BURNET - I want to go to the transit officers. I've caught buses and I've been at bus stops where, clearly, it's a security firm rather than Metro employees. I'm curious to know why it hasn't been direct employment with Metro. Also, when are transit officers likely to expand to areas other than Hobart?

Mr ABETZ - I'll let the CEO answer.

Mr BRAXTON-SMITH - I just might take that as a general question. Transit officers are typically separate from the workforce of the bus and not necessarily the same employer. If you look at other jurisdictions, and excuse me if I talk about the mainland, but typically they are a separate group. You have a police transport command and you have transport officers who cover all modes of transport in nominated areas typically. What we do is we gather information about incidents to provide those who direct those people to the places that are known hotspots.

In terms of the powers that are available to Metro, particularly for a bus operator, it's often more efficient and more practical for the authorised officer to be a separate person. You do not want to be in a position where you're expecting the person driving the bus to deal with antisocial behaviour. There are quite clear protocols in place for them to alert the control centre should then should there be a need.

Ms BURNET - And the expansion?

Mr BRAXTON-SMITH - That's a question to the minister.

Ms COOPER - Sorry, just to clarify because I know you made a reference to Metro. The transit officers are run by the department, but they're actually for all of industry. They're not just for Metro, so they travel on other operators as well. They're not just Metro transit. That's where it's not a Metro initiative. We're supportive of it; they travel on our services, but they're not us.

Ms BURNET - Is it being expanded to Launceston?

Mr ABETZ - Not that I'm aware of, but I'll take that on notice and get the information from the Department of State Growth (DSG).

Mrs BESWICK - I note in the annual report that there's no breakdown between Hobart, Launceston and Burnie operations. There have been in previous reports, but not this current year. I'm wondering if you can table or give us some more information of which ones are performing well and which ones are - obviously, Hobart is struggling. I assume the other ones are doing better. Just a bit of an understanding there on how the financials and the passengers are working between the different regions.

Mr BRAXTON-SMITH - We will need to take the question on notice. In general terms, service reliability in Launceston and Burnie is hitting our numbers. Katie is indicating to me that she has more information, so I will hand to her for the information that we do have available. Anything else, we'll see what we can endeavour to get for you.

Ms COOPER - If we compare for 2022-23, if I use that as - and it is slightly adjusted because of the term dates and things. We always work with term dates, school holidays and weekends adjusting. If I compare 2022-23 for passenger journeys in Hobart, we were down 2.6 per cent. If we look in Launceston for the same, we're up 0.5 per cent. For Burnie, in the same period it's 3.7 per cent.

Revenue-wise, can you just clarify what exactly you're wanting to know when you say performance? If you can just clarify that for me a bit more what you're seeking.

PUBLIC

Mr ABETZ - There were no temporary service adjustments for Burnie or Launceston.

Ms COOPER - No, not at all.

Mrs BESWICK - I guess I want to know the profitability of the different areas as opposed to - obviously, we're in lots of loss.

Mr BRAXTON-SMITH - If I may, none of the areas is profitable. Consistent with public transport systems generally, the majority of the funding for it comes not through the fare box but from a service contract with the responsible government agency.

Ms BROWN - Minister, this was a question from budget Estimates that you invited me to ask here. I hope you have the answer.

Mr ABETZ - Are you sure it's not for DSG?

Ms BROWN - Well, I'm sure you'll tell me. The minority Liberal government has committed \$5 million to Metro Tasmania for the bus replacement program. What buses will be purchased?

Mr BRAXTON-SMITH - If I can take that, that is an acquittal of an outstanding payment for buses already procured and in service.

Ms BROWN - Okay. What type of buses were they?

Mr BRAXTON-SMITH - These are BusTech buses.

Ms COOPER - They're the BusTech X01.1s. We call them the 900s. If you see them running around with the 900 on the plate, it's some of those.

Ms BROWN - Where are they running? Are they down south, in the north?

Ms COOPER - They're spread across the network. We move the fleet around to manage kilometres and assets. The majority of them are probably going to be in Hobart, just based on ratio, but they do also operate in the north as well.

Ms BROWN - How many buses do you get for \$5 million?

Ms COOPER - That would've been about 10.

Mr O'BYRNE - Just back to that 16 hours, I have in front of me an email from a manager of recruitment services to a person whose name has been blocked out. It says:

Review of Casual Employment: As you would appreciate, maintaining a reliable and flexible casual pool is crucial for Metro to meet our operational demands. We want to ensure that casual employees who continue their roles with us have availability that matches our business requirements and, therefore, require casual employees who are willing to work no less than 16 hours per week.

It goes on:

Based on the information, we're reviewing all casual positions to ensure alignment. It may need to take adjustments, including potentially discontinuing employment in cases where availability is not sufficient.

That's the 16 hours I was referring to. That sounds counterintuitive to me in terms of what you've said to us about trying to provide that flexible kind of environment to allow staff to stay. I'm not sure what the magic is about 16 hours. Is it two shifts, is it one shift?

Ms COOPER - I'm not sure; we'll need to take that on notice, to be honest.

Mr O'BYRNE - You're not aware of this letter?

Ms COOPER - No, but that would come from, I'm guessing, probably our rostering area, which I'll need to get some further detail on.

Mr O'BYRNE - It's from a manager of recruitment services. I suppose my concern is that I've been made aware of it. You said that is not what you're wanting to do and you seem to have just been made aware of it at this hearing.

Ms COOPER - No, but correct in the sense that it's not something I'm aware of with the 16-hour minimum. I will go away and do some further research and respond to your question.

Mr O'BYRNE - It worries me that you say driver recruitment and retention is one of your key issues and here we have a circumstance where you're not across some of the detail of what's actually happening on the ground, which is counter to what you're trying to do. That concerns me.

CHAIR - And your question?

Mr O'BYRNE - What do you think my question would be on that basis? You say it's important, but then you deny something's happening. I get some crucial details and then you're surprised by it.

Mr ABETZ - No, didn't deny, just not aware.

Mr O'BYRNE - Sorry, not aware. I'll correct that.

Mr ABETZ - Yes. When you run an enterprise such as Metro, it stands to reason you won't be across every granular detail of the operation because you have managers and -

Mr O'BYRNE - Would you call that granular, the key issue threatening the services of Metro across the state?

Mr ABETZ - I'm not sure that that's threatening the services of Metro across the state, but I understand the advocacy point you're making.

Mr O'BYRNE - You've cancelled hundreds of services, minister.

PUBLIC

Mr ABETZ - If the recruitment manager was here at the table, I would be surprised if he or she was not aware of the particular matter you raise. To suggest that the chair or CEO should be aware of that is an observation that you make, but I think in fairness to the people at the table you have to cut them a bit of slack from time to time, and they did agree to take it on notice.

Mr O'BYRNE - I'll cut some slack for the new chair, but the CEO has said for the last two years that driver recruitment and retention is the most crucial issue, so something like this is not granular detail, minister, with the greatest of respect.

Mr ABETZ - Well, we will have to disagree on the description.

CHAIR - To be clear, are you wanting to put that on notice?

Mr O'BYRNE - I no longer need it on notice because they're actually doing it. I don't need them to confirm or deny.

Ms BURNET - Minister, the disability action plan was mentioned before, which is very good to see, although I haven't actually seen it. Is it on the website?

Ms COOPER - Yes.

Ms BURNET - Clearly getting on to the buses is a major issue. I know what you're going to say. You're going to say this is the responsibility of DSG and councils. It's all very well to have a disability action plan, which is admirable, but how are people who have physical disabilities going to access buses? In Tasmania we have a much higher proportion than anywhere else of people with disabilities, so how are we really going to address these things?

Mr ABETZ - Metro is responsible for its buses and the service it provides. As I understand it, every bus has a ramp. I don't know how it all works, but some of the buses can somehow lower themselves to provide easier access, but the state of footpaths and other infrastructure from where people seek to enter the bus is not within the province of Metro.

Ms BURNET - It's very frustrating, I must say, Chair.

Mr ABETZ - I am sorry, you say it's frustrating but it's the truth. It's the fact. If you want Metro to be responsible for the footpaths around the state, we might include that in its charter, but the government is not so minded.

Ms BURNET - It would be good to have solutions to all these issues that fall under the government's remit, I suppose.

Mr ABETZ - And local councils.

Ms BURNET - In relation to student access, I wrote to you earlier in the year and you responded in relation to an issue for some students with special needs in in Glenorchy who still had difficulties getting passes. Is there any possibility that students can get onto buses without passes? Will that be considered by the organisation?

PUBLIC

Ms COOPER - I'm not sure I am quite following the question. Can I ask you to clarify that?

Mr BRAXTON-SMITH - Is that a policy question for government or is it a practice question for Metro?

Ms BURNET - There was a particular issue with cards being issued.

Ms COOPER - Like a GreenCard?

Ms BURNET - Yes, but a special card. Having identification was an issue for these students, so they couldn't get a pass provided.

Ms COOPER - Is it to do with them being issued with a student card as a GreenCard from a Metro shop?

Ms BURNET - Yes.

Ms COOPER - So they didn't have the right ID to go through that.

Ms BURNET - Yes. They're not going to have ID.

Ms COOPER - That's a policy issue and Metro has to abide by the rules as stipulated.

Ms BURNET - Minister, is there any way that you can look at those rules to make that a possibility or in fact make student travel -

Ms COOPER - Can I just clarify? Do they have a school card? Do they have school ID?

Ms BURNET - No.

Ms COOPER - I'm just trying to understand the question.

Mr ABETZ - As I understand it, Metro accepts school cards as identification, but -

Ms BURNET - I was about getting the identification. They didn't have identification in the first place.

Mr ABETZ - some schools don't have school cards and as a result the students from those particular schools can't get access to a GreenCard.

Ms COOPER - Right; that is probably a DSG one.

Mr ABETZ - Yes, DSG possibly, and the Education department as well. Was the particular school you were referring to, Ms Burnett, a private school?

Ms BURNET - It is Catholic, Edmund Rice school.

Mr ABETZ - Yes, up Hopkins Street in Moonah? Where was it? Somewhere. Allow me to take that on notice to see what can be done because clearly we want to students to be able to

PUBLIC

access the public transport system and if there is that gap in the system it needs to be looked at.

Ms BURNET - Thanks, minister.

Mr ABETZ - Let me try to find out what the answer is, whether it is with Metro, DSG or Education, but let's try to find a solution to it. The CEO has an answer to a previous question.

Ms COOPER - It is about your question on exit surveys by occupation. From female respondents, 8 per cent didn't specify their occupation, 25 per cent came from the admin staff and 67 per cent came from the operational staff. For male respondents, 5 per cent were not specified, 8 per cent were from the administration group and 88 per cent came from operations.

CHAIR - Just to clarify, Ms Burnet, the question that you are asking on notice I am not sure is an issue for Metro. I am not sure whether -

Ms BUTLER - I will write to the minister.

CHAIR - I was going to say if you are happy to write to the minister to seek clarification, rather than tabling it through this committee, because these questions will go straight to Metro obviously.

Mr BEHRAKIS - Minister, you mentioned in your opening statement the It's Not OK campaign. Can you please provide the committee with some further details on this important campaign and why it is so important?

Mr ABETZ - Yes. It's Not OK was seen as necessary and launched in July 2023, as I understand it, with the support of the RTB release and a whole host of other organisations because of the antisocial behaviour, part of which included, for want of the better term, just racist behaviour as well, especially to some of our bus operators. It is clearly not okay. This indicates Metro's commitment to safety and appropriate behaviours on the bus. If there is a display of antisocial behaviour, it stands to reason that patrons may well no longer wish to take that service if they feel unsafe or are subjected to language and behaviours they don't want to have to observe, let alone potentially for their children to have to observe if they're catching the bus with the children. If the CEO has anything further to add to that, please do.

Ms COOPER - The campaign was one part of our wider approach to dealing with the antisocial behaviour. We had a positive response when we initially launched in July to October, and that was also reinvigorated when we went into the back-to-school period in early 2024. It was designed so that we could peak up and peak down as per the needs that were required.

The core message behind the campaign was to demonstrate to the Tasmanian community that any type of bad behaviour on a bus or in a Metro shop, online or even in the wider community - we just don't think it's okay. It had a really far reach, to be honest, and we had some fantastic support from other communities' agencies, which was appreciated. It focused on trying to set a bar as to what's acceptable or not acceptable. It's not necessarily something that will stop the behaviour, but it's a barrier or at least a very clear communication of what is or isn't acceptable.

That campaign had over 6 million reaches across our channels, which we were really pleased with. It was quite successful from the reach it was able to get. The campaign had fantastic support from RACT, from the Hobart City Council, Clarence Council, Glenorchy Council, the Property Council of Australia, COTA and various others, which was really positive.

Mr ABETZ - For those who are subjected to that antisocial behaviour, it lets them know that Metro and the community at large is on their side, so hopefully it discourages the bad behaviours, but it also provides support to those that are subjected to that antisocial behaviour.

Mr O'BYRNE - A question on the consultancies: there's an organisation called Adaptable HR - the description is industrial relations and human resources - who charged Metro slightly under \$140,000 for five months' work. I know you have a couple of Tasmanian legal firms that I know work in industrial relations, and that totals close to \$150,000 as well for the full 12 months. That's a lot of money for five months' work.

Mr BRAXTON-SMITH - Clearly, we work on commercial rates, and we deal with specialists who charge appropriately for the Tasmanian market. In relation to the quantum, to put it in context, we have three different enterprise agreements, all of which have expired and all of which have been in negotiation, so we needed to seek appropriate advice and get assistance on each of those. If you give consideration to the fact that our payroll is somewhere between \$35 million and \$40 million per annum - and we're talking about three years - then a little bit of legal advice to ensure that we are in the right space for \$120 million worth of Tasmanian taxpayers' money is proportionately money well spent.

Mr O'BYRNE - Can you confirm that the principal of Adaptable HR is a person who recently worked for Metro Tasmania for a period of time and may have received a payout - I'm unsure of that - but has moved very quickly over into consulting to do work that potentially they were doing internally?

Ms COOPER - No. What I can confirm is that Adaptable HR, one of the owners- I don't know if it's a principal, but one of the owners of the business - used to be the chief operating officer for Metro, and that, I think, makes her uniquely placed to provide us some of that great insight. Her background and qualifications are in industrial relations, but that's why we found her advice so valued.

Mr O'BYRNE - Just for five months work is pretty impressive. How many internal HR staff do you have?

Ms COOPER - That work in this space?

Mr O'BYRNE - Sorry, what do you mean, 'work in this space'? What does that mean?

Mr BRAXTON-SMITH - Industrial relations.

Mr O'BYRNE - So HR people, yes.

Mr BRAXTON-SMITH - HR or IR.

Mr O'BYRNE - It's a combination of both.

Ms COOPER - But if I can specify to be fair, our people and safety team - we have a team that deals with learning and development. We have a team that works with safety. We have a team that works with recruitment. Then there's what we would call a generalist that works with industrial relations.

In that industrial relations and general space, up until probably two months ago, we had one person, which was a senior, on board. We've had significant problems recruiting someone to be in that space. We have now in the last - two, I think, one of the employees has been on board - and I'm going on memory - I'm going to say eight weeks and one probably four weeks. It might be 12 weeks, but in that period. We had vacancies in that space that we were recruiting significantly for well over a year. We were very short.

Ms BROWN - Metro Tasmania has incurred a loss of \$4.6 million in the year 2023-24 compared to a loss of \$2 million the year prior before tax. With such a loss, and wage freezes for drivers and industrial action across the two other areas, why has the executive management team taken a 3 per cent increase to their wages?

Ms COOPER - Can I just correct a point? There's been no pay freeze, so I'm not sure where that's coming from.

Ms BROWN - Okay. With industrial action - with workers negotiating and some taking up to two years to negotiate new EBAs, we have drivers still in negotiations for just a decent wage, and the executive team has taken a 3 per cent increase. I would like to know, with such a loss on the books and with industrial action, why has the management team taken an increase in their wages rather than looking after their workers?

Mr BRAXTON-SMITH - Just to clarify, you stated two years. In fact, the Metro Tasmania Bus Operators Enterprise Agreement expired on 16 September this year, so that would be less than three months.

Ms BROWN - Sorry, I was actually talking about other areas, not just the drivers.

Mr BRAXTON-SMITH - The Metro Tasmania Administration Employees Enterprise agreement expired on 22 April this year, and the Metro Tasmania Engineering Employees Enterprise Agreement's nominal expiry date was 30 June 2023, so, just for the record -

Ms BROWN - So just shy of two years then.

CHAIR - Ms Brown.

Ms BROWN - He's being argumentative, Chair.

CHAIR - Please, Ms Brown, he is answering the question. He is not being argumentative. He's putting facts on the record. You'll get a chance to ask another question. Please don't interrupt him while he's answering the question.

Mr BRAXTON-SMITH - For the record, the date of the expiry was 30 June 2023. We had a 94 per cent yes vote on our amended offer earlier this week. As I calculate it, that would

be 17 months for a group of 24 employees out of 500. That is the fact base, so the premise of your question is not - that's me clarifying the fact base. Thank you, Chair.

In relation to your question about our employees, every employee has a contract of employment and every employee is entitled to remuneration and remuneration adjustment in accordance with that contract of employment.

Ms COOPER - Can I just add to that, if I may, just so we're clear. From an engineering point of view, whilst we've been negotiating with them since 2023, Metro did make an in-advance payment of 10 per cent round figures, depending on the levels, but for the majority of our staff on level 4, they got that in advance of that agreement being paid, and that has been since that time last year.

If we go to administration, that's now actually been agreed and going through, and if we also want to talk about our bus operators and their wage increase, with the government's support, from - I'm going on memory - November, December last year, but towards the end of 2023, whilst their enterprise agreement did not have any arrangements in it for them to have an increase because it had not expired at that stage, the government, as part of the temporary service adjustment, actually provided Metro with funding where those staff got paid 10 per cent in advance, and they've had it from the end of last year to now. So I actually think that we've been demonstrating and paying our employees very fairly whilst we're still in negotiations with that enterprise agreement.

Mr BEHRAKIS - Minister, are you aware, or is anyone at the table aware, of Metro drivers reporting any issues navigating their routes based on new bike lanes around the city?

Mr ABETZ - A number of bus operators have stopped me in the street, rung the office, et cetera, to indicate that proposed bus lanes and actual bus lanes in the city are not conducive to public transport being able to negotiate around corners and down narrow streets, et cetera. That is why with all these things you've got to take a balanced approach. As you might be aware, in recent times I made the call in relation to Collins Street bike paths. When I was asked as to why, one of the reasons was bus operators indicating the difficulties they would have in navigating Collins Street amongst commuters, shop owners, property owners, et cetera. That is where you have to keep these things in balance. I appreciated the feedback from bus operators in relation to the challenges that bike lanes provide. Not everybody's able to ride a bike. A lot of people need public transport, so you've got to balance these things out in a sensible manner. That's what I try to do.

Ms BURNET - Minister, on page 21 of the annual report it appears that only five of the 13 key performance targets were met. How will these be addressed and how will you increase patronage, frequency of service and reliability?

Mr ABETZ - Our key performance targets are targets Metro seeks to achieve. With targets, from time to time there are intervening factors which don't allow you to achieve that to which you aspire. In relation to the various items, CEO or chair, should you wish to address, I would be pleased if you would do so.

Mr BRAXTON-SMITH - Is there any particular performance indicator we should be talking about, or would you prefer just a broad overview?

Ms BURNET - Just a broad overview is fine, although patronage is one of the things.

Mr ABETZ - Patronage has already been covered and it's been an experience not only in Tasmania post-COVID. Most have recovered to about 80 per cent.

Mr BRAXTON-SMITH - As a board we've set ambitious targets to stretch management. We want to grow patronage. We think public transport is a good choice for Tasmanians and for mobility, so we always kind of ask for a little bit of stretch in setting patronage targets. We did anticipate that there would be an uptick this year, but regrettably not. If you if you think about the cycle, these targets would have been set in early 2023 when we were still wondering what might happen out of COVID, and there was kind of a more optimistic view of what patronage might return to in public transport. That's us setting ourselves in a little bit of stretch, which also goes to fare revenue, and in turn will affect cost per service kilometre because it's your total cost base divided by the number of patrons.

Ms BURNET - They're related, aren't they?

Mr BRAXTON-SMITH - And work effectiveness. In terms of operator efficiency, regrettably, I would say there are two fundamental causes. First, clearly we reduced the number of services we are operating by about 6 per cent, and that necessarily affects that target because we're delivering less trips than we have that are within our control, because it's within our control, so that's in the number.

The other thing that is occurring is because of road works, for instance. Work on the Bridgewater bridge is particularly disrupting the on-time running performance, and now I think it's the Southern Outlet. Our run times are actually based on contractually committed run times and timetables which were set in 2019. As traffic patterns have changed and traffic intensity increases, our peak performance tends to decline a little bit and that's the other contributing factor there.

The real-time information we're expecting based on experience elsewhere will actually address that because it effectively puts control back in the customers' hands of their time. The way we've approached our responsibilities is that we are fitting a unit to buses called a telematics unit, which provides real-time data location on your bus network and that enables you to see and fine tune your network in a way that's not to date been available to Metro as a tool they can use to optimise run times. In the interests of time, I won't go into that unless I'm asked another question.

At-fault collisions, regrettably, are something we are monitoring very closely as a board. To give you a sense of it, what typically happens with bus drivers when we train them is they are very vigilant for the first six months or so and then there's a certain point where confidence comes in so we have seen in our trends where the struck objects cause takes a spike up and correlates with six to 12 to 18 months of service. There's a supplementary training and awareness campaign that's been dealt with and we're also looking at other measures as part of our enterprise agreement negotiations where we can enliven awareness and align our workforce's focus to the safety objectives we have, which are to minimise struck objects.

Mr O'BYRNE - Minister, in the annual report it mentions a widening structural funding gap. Could you expand on the underlying issues around the widening structural funding gap?

Mr BRAXTON-SMITH - I'm happy to take that, minister. The current contract, as is noted in the report, was entered into with DSG in mid-2022, 28 June from memory, and at the time of entering into that contract, the letter to the then chair acknowledged that there was a structural funding issue that essentially arises out of revenue differences. In simple terms, an assumption was made that the revenue from fare box would return to its pre-COVID levels, about \$16 million a year, which was in turn premised on the patronage returning to pre-COVID levels.

That has not occurred, as a consequence of which all of our contract payments are structured on the basis that we receive and retain the fare box revenue, but Metro is what you might call at risk on variance to that. When the fare box revenue is lower than was set in the contract payment mechanism target, we end up with a structural funding gap which is a consequence of the way the payment mechanisms in the contract were calculated. That's our challenge.

Mr O'BYRNE - You've also had a reduction in the contractual payments from DSG to the tune last financial year of \$2.37 million because of basically the cancellations or the service reductions. What is the projected reduction in contractual payments year on year moving forward? Is this structural funding gap effectively going to get worse because not only is the expected revenue not coming in, you've been stung because you haven't been able to deliver the service you've been contracted to? Is that a double whammy? Where does this end up, really? That's my question.

Mr BRAXTON-SMITH - They're two separate and unconnected issues on the service.

Mr O'BYRNE - Both relate to revenue, though.

Mr BRAXTON-SMITH - In any business, everything is connected to either revenue or cost. To your question, they're two separate issues on the service adjustment payment mechanism in the contract. As I indicated earlier, we are very focused on restoring the rest of those services soon as we can do so reliably. We've started the process, we're going to continue that and that will deal in this financial year with any reduction in contract payments. That mechanism was designed to be broadly cost reflective, but in essence there's a lag when you're trying to rebuild a workforce, because we're spending a lot of money on recruitment and training at the moment to recruit, so that adds a little bit of pressure. We're confident that once we have a strategy in place, we are endeavouring to seek agreement with our workforce on the terms and conditions which will stabilise the industrial relations environment. We are then very much focused as our next priority in reintroducing those services and working with the flexibilities that we have in the enterprise agreement to expedite that. We're still in negotiation with the workforce, as Katie says, so I'm not going to go into the details of what our positions are.

On the revenue, that is a matter that - we've had indications from government that we should engage with them on that, and that's what we'll be doing.

Mr ABETZ - If I may, Chair, quickly to Ms Burnet in relation to student travel. I can indicate that Metro staff would use their discretion if a student didn't have ID, and parents or guardians are encouraged to contact Metro if they require assistance in that regard. I understand there is flexibility and discretion, and Metro are willing to deal with individual cases when and as they arise.

Mrs BESWICK - Chair, you mentioned before that no route is profitable. Obviously, we want to make the most of our finances and not be just throwing money away. What are the processes you use internally to keep things streamlined and efficient? Not staffing, obviously, we want our bus drivers to be paid. Also, what other options have you considered in terms of growth or in your strategic planning generally?

Mr BRAXTON-SMITH - Thank you for the question. Chair, you might need to keep me to being brief and on point on this because it's been a particular focus for the board this year. There are two principal new software tools that we have procured and we're currently in delivery.

One is a system known as HASTUS, which is effectively for the scheduling and rostering on network. It is a contemporary software tool that allows you to optimise the deployment of your bus fleet and the rostering of your staff in accordance with a very well designed and standard piece of software that's used typically in the industry. Currently we're using the system that was supplied within it, which is now end-of-life or beyond-end-of-life system that's attached to the ticketing system. That doesn't have the capability or the flexibility to run scenarios, as you do in HASTUS. We are going to be working with our workforce and with the benefit of the flexibility provisions that we agree to seek to optimise the bus network to be more efficient in the use of our resources.

In terms of human resource management, again, we've had what I sometimes characterise as we've got good people and they are using the best tools that the 20th century gave them to actually manage their accountability. Again, we're upgrading our human resources management system, which will enable us to better manage our human resources in terms of working within the flexibilities of our enterprise agreement.

Those are two initiatives that we've focused on where we expect to be able to make better use of taxpayer dollars to deliver public transport services in Tasmania.

Ms BROWN - Metro Tasmania has been fighting a case in Fair Work Commission this year regarding providing an employee eight months of paid parental leave so they can look after their newborn baby and partner, who had to undergo an emergency C-section. Why did Metro decide to take on this fight?

Ms COOPER - It's currently a case in front of Fair Work, so I'm going to choose my words carefully in that sense because it's currently under appeal. Metro was very supportive of the employee having time off to care for the family. The debate has not been about whether the person should have time off. The interpretation of law is really about whether it is considered carers leave or whether it's considered parental leave. It's an interpretation of law issue.

Ms BROWN - Can you provide detail on how much Metro has currently paid on lawyers for this case?

Ms COOPER - I can, but it's still in appeal at the moment. At this point in time?

Ms BROWN - Just up to date.

PUBLIC

Ms COOPER - I'll take it on notice, but yeah. Because it's Fair Work, so I'm not actually sure there's a lot because most of that's not there. So, I need, it's a full bench. I don't actually know that -

Mr BRAXTON-SMITH - We'll take the question on notice.

Ms COOPER - Yeah, I think it's safer to take it on notice and I can come back to you.

Ms BROWN - I note in the annual report that no international travel has taken place by Metro directors, executives or employees. Can you provide any information on interstate travel?

Mr BRAXTON-SMITH - Yes, we can, but I think I'll be the principal offender because I live in South Australia. I'm the 20 per cent of the board that is non-resident in Tasmania. We'll provide you with the details on notice.

Mr ABETZ - But a quality addition.

Ms BURNET - In relation to the health and safety of drivers particularly, are drivers consulted about the safety or otherwise of routes to determine if there's any sort of change to service?

Mr ABETZ - CEO?

Ms COOPER - Yes, certainly. If I can break that into two parts because I think there's two parts to that. One is as far as the actual network goes, that's a network determined by the department, so the drivers are not engaged in that process because it's not done by Metro.

Where we have engaged with, particularly, our health and safety reps are obviously on committees when we've had adjustments around, you know, the rock-throwing incidents where we've had to have some services suspended. We've certainly engaged very strongly with the health and safety reps in that regard. And also when those services go back in on those events.

Ms BURNET - In relation to Gagebrook in particular, was there any tension between health safety reps and advice in relation to that route?

Ms COOPER - There was at one point, yes. There was - I'm going to get my - my wording might not be 100 per cent, but take the principle of there was a provisional improvement notice (PIN) issued by one of our health and safety reps, but it was also withdrawn because the process wasn't perhaps followed appropriately, as I recall.

CHAIR - I don't know why, but I'm going give Mr O'Byrne the call.

Mr O'BYRNE - I might dissent from your ruling because it's just outrageous that you refer to me that way. Anyway, thank you, Chair.

Mr ABETZ - I'll reserve judgement.

Mr O'BYRNE - No, I think you prejudged me many years ago, minister. It's going back to the perennial issue around the services. There were 900 services per week slashed in

PUBLIC

August 2023. That's nearly 19 odd months ago. When does it go from being temporary to permanent? What's the line? I think we're there but, minister, what's your view of this?

Mr ABETZ - Well, 'permanent' would be the word you would use if there were no intention of restoring. As you've heard this morning, 26, 27, whatever, services have been restored, which indicates that there is an ambition, a determination to restore the services. If it were to be permanent, it would mean that a line has been drawn and there is no aspiration or no work being done to restore the services. Yet there clearly is being work done and we want to restore the services as quickly as possible. Some have been restored. Hopefully others will continue to be restored.

But if you were to say to me that they have been temporary for too long, I could not help but agree with you. We can argue or discuss the topic of what's temporary, what's permanent. I think we are both in heated agreement that we want them restored as soon and quickly as possible. And I can assure you, not only are you and I agreed, but the chair and the CEO and all of Metro are agreed. And on that happy unifying note, Chair, I might draw your attention to the time.

Mr O'BYRNE - There is a difference between ambition and hope. Instead of saying 'as soon as possible', surely the Tasmanian community deserves a bit more than 'as soon as possible'.

Mr ABETZ - We do have a plan. Chair, do you want to? No?

CHAIR - I am waiting for the time to tick over, minister. You've pre-empted it just a touch. The time now being 1.30 p.m., the time for scrutiny has expired. Thank you all for your attendance.

The witnesses withdrew.