



PARLIAMENT OF TASMANIA

TRANSCRIPT

HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY

ESTIMATES COMMITTEE B

Hon. Jo Palmer MLC

Wednesday 19 November 2025

MEMBERS

Mr Rob Fairs (Chair)
Mr Dean Winter (Deputy Chair)
Mr Vica Bayley
Prof George Razay

OTHER PARTICIPATING MEMBERS

Mr Willie
Mr Garland
Ms Brown
Mr Shelton
Ms Rosol
Ms Haddad
Mr Mitchell

IN ATTENDANCE

HON. JO PALMER MLC

Minister for Education, Minister Children and Youth, Minister for Disability.

Ministerial Office representatives

Lisa Free

Chief of Staff

Emma Lovibond

Senior Adviser

Lucy Mercier

Senior Adviser

Rachael Andrews

Senior Adviser

Kristie Trambas

Senior Adviser

Education Portfolio

Department for Education, Children and Young People representatives

Ginna Webster

Secretary

Sue McKerracher

Deputy Secretary People and Culture

Trudy Pearce

Deputy Secretary Schools and Early Years

Jenny Burgess

Deputy Secretary Strategy and Performance

Peter Whitcombe

Deputy Secretary Child Safety and Youth Justice Operations

Tiffany Black

Executive Director Services for Children and Young People and Families

Katharine O'Donnell

Director Education Regulation

Jason Sowell

Director Business Planning and Improvement

Disability Services Portfolio

Output 7.1

Department of Premier and Cabinet representatives

Mellisa (Mel) Gray

Deputy Secretary, Policy and Reform

Ingrid Ganley

Director Disability and Reform

PUBLIC

The committee met at 9.00 a.m.

CHAIR - I want to remind all members about the Standing Orders and acceptable parliamentary behaviours expected in Estimates hearings. The same rules and expectations of members conduct apply here as in the Chamber. I ask all members to adhere to these and respect their colleagues, the relevant minister and their staff and my rulings as Chair.

I also remind members to please address all questions to the minister. In respect of time limits on questions and answers, over the past few days I've been very lenient when it comes to these limits. That will remain for now, but if members start to abuse it, I will adhere to a stricter policy going forward which will apply to both questions and answers.

As Chair, I will not be tolerating disrespectful behaviour and if this occurs, warnings will be issued. Once you have three warnings, you will be removed from the hearing. Again, I remind all members to please show respect to each other and our witnesses and please use correct titles when addressing members and witnesses.

The scrutiny of the education portfolio will now begin. I welcome the minister and other witnesses to the committee. I invite the minister to introduce persons at the table from left to right, names and positions, please, for the benefit of Hansard.

Ms PALMER - Going from left to right, I'd like to introduce Jenny Burgess, who is the Deputy Secretary for Strategy and Performance. Next to her is Trudy Pearce, who is our Deputy Secretary for Schools and Early Years. To my right, we have our Secretary, Ginna Webster, responsible for everything. Next to Ginna, we have Sue McKerracher, Deputy Secretary for People and Culture.

CHAIR - Thank you, minister. The time scheduled for the estimates of the Minister for Education is two and a half hours. We will take a short break for morning tea at 10.30 a.m.

The resolution of the House provides for a minister to provide additional information to a committee either later that day or in writing as an answer to a question taken on notice. To submit a question on notice, the member must first ask their question to the minister and the minister must indicate they will take it on notice. A member must then put the question in writing and hand it to the committee secretary before the end of the portfolio's examination so it can be included in correspondence to the minister for answer.

I remind you that the microphones are sensitive, so I ask you to be mindful of Hansard and be careful when moving your folders, documents and water glasses around the table. Also, it is difficult for Hansard to differentiate when people are talking over each other, so I would ask members to speak one at a time to assist with this.

Would the Minister like to make a short opening statement?

Ms PALMER - Wonderful to be here as the Minister for Education and to have my team with me here at the table and those seated behind. The Tasmanian government is making bold, system-wide changes to lift learning outcomes for every student in every school. The 2025-26 State Budget reflects this commitment. Across the next four years, more than \$8.9 billion is being invested across the education portfolio. Including \$1.45 billion for in school education alone in the 2024-25 budget.

PUBLIC

Over the last decade, the education portfolio funding has increased by an average of 5 per cent per year. In the 2025 school year, we've seen an increase of \$31.8 million provided through school resource packages directly to schools. This investment reflects our unwavering focus on learners, their outcomes, their wellbeing and their futures. The budget responds to the recommendations of the Commission of Inquiry and the Independent Education Review, both of which provide a strong foundation for lasting reform.

Our next step is to bring this important work that we are already doing together, under one long-term strategy: Education Together, transforming learning through collaboration. This will be our vision outlining how we strengthen our education system over the next five years, and importantly, why this work matters so deeply for every child, every educator, and every community. I look forward to releasing a draft for consultation next year.

Key investments in this budget include the supercharging of the Lifting Literacy Initiative, accelerating the transition to structured literacy across all year levels, and the implementation of a new school staff well-being model supporting our frontline educators. This budget also supports the delivery of the Better and Fairer Schools Agreement, the rollout of the Variety School Breakfast Program and the extension of the School Lunch Program.

It increases supports for students with disability and boosts early childhood services through our Child and Family Learning centres. We remain committed to closing the gap for Aboriginal learners by providing inclusive, culturally rich resources that embed Tasmanian Aboriginal histories and cultures into teaching and learning.

Finally, with \$294 million over four years committed to education infrastructure, we continue to build inspiring places to learn. Together, this budget reflects not just investment, but a deep belief in our learners, in our educators, and the future of education for Tasmania. I'm happy to take questions. Thank you, Chair.

Mr WILLIE - Minister, I ask these questions as a father of kids in the state system and also an ex-primary school teacher with a lot of contacts in the system. This is just one example of some of the correspondence I was receiving yesterday, regarding the coloured sand. As I said yesterday, nobody can blame you as minister that we have coloured sand in our classrooms, they're in classrooms all over the country, it's the response that matters. I received this yesterday, it says:

Teachers are wondering about the patchy response. Our principal was waiting for a directive and in the meantime, went to classrooms with other senior staff to collect said sand, double-bagged and stored it in an office. In the meantime, residual sand remains in classrooms - in rubber mats, walls, stuck on toys.

Teachers have been told that if they don't feel comfortable, they should teach elsewhere until the room is cleaned. As a matter of urgency, I ask that you seek clarification on the toxicity and level of alert, and proper cleaning practices required.

Why did it take so long for the state system to respond to this?

Ms PALMER - Thank you very much, Mr Willie, for the question. I do want to acknowledge the amazing work that's been done by the department in a short period of time.

PUBLIC

In particular, the work that's been done by our school leaders, who have been fantastic in making sure that they're providing information to us, in order for us to make really good decisions.

The department is certainly taking all necessary actions to quantify the risks that may exist, and all work has been informed by expert advice and it's being overseen by the incident management team within the Department of Education, Children and Young People (DECYP). The department is serious about any concerns that could affect the safety of children and certainly the safety of our workforce and, indeed, our families, as we know this product is in homes as well. It is monitoring the situation carefully and it's working closely with our schools, our Child and Family Learning Centres (CFLCs) and, of course, WorkSafe Tasmania.

I do want to emphasise that the advice that we've received from the very beginning of this alert, from the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) last week, has always maintained that the actual risk to students, staff and families is low - I believe the wording is now moving towards 'very low'. The actions that we are undertaking are very much of that precautionary nature.

Now, I will say that as soon as we received the notification from the ACCC, we followed their advice, and the secretary can speak to the details of that advice. We made sure we were communicating with schools with the advice that we had received, which was that it was low-risk and this is how you are to manage the product.

It's been a very interesting time, because we've seen completely different responses within schools in Tasmania. We've also seen completely different responses from schools right across Australia. The Australian Capital Territory had a very different response to what we've seen in other states. We still have, as of the work I was doing last night, Western Australia, Victoria and New South Wales I believe still don't have any school closures at all. I was reading some comments from the Western Australian premier who was saying they believe this incident could be managed in schools and that there wasn't a need for school closures at that point in time. There's been really different responses right across the board to the exact same situation - every state is in the exact same situation with regard to this product.

It was the secretary's responsibility to look at this situation and to have a measured response, where we've been very clear is that we need to be communicating with schools and we've certainly had some feedback that principals have been happy with the communications that we have. If you have examples of schools where that's not happening, please just speak to me about that and I will action that immediately with our team. We don't want any school environments to be feeling that they don't know what's happening.

It is important to note that we have been following advice, but advice didn't all come out in one page at one point in time. We had the ACCC's advice. At a later time, we had WorkSafe Tasmania's advice. That differed slightly in the wording to what other states and territories were getting from their relevant bodies. So, we've taken the advice that we had in Tasmania and had a measured, and I would say a calm and responsible response to that advice.

I might get the secretary to add some detail to the response that we've taken.

Ms WEBSTER - Through you, minister. The ACCC issued the notice, and on Friday 14 November the department provided advice to schools and CFLCs and our other

PUBLIC

business units relating to that advice, and advising to follow the advice from the ACCC. We advised them to take the steps that were outlined in that ACCC advice.

The department's work health and safety team commenced providing advice to sites in relation to handling and disposal of the product. That was very much in line with the ACCCs initial advice.

WorkSafe then issued a safety alert regarding that ACCC advice, that was quite strong, around what communities should do around the product, obviously. I would assume that many people would not be used to dealing with these sorts of things in the community. So understandably, WorkSafe provided quite strong advice for the community, and then provided advice around duty holders. As a Secretary of the Department, I'm a duty holder in terms of the PCBU (person conducting a business or undertaking).

On Monday, we issued an update to schools and CFLCs and our other business units, providing guidance on the actions following that WorkSafe advice. We engaged with a consulting company with accredited asbestos assessors to provide us with expert advice in relation to the potential risk and actions that were required to mitigate that risk.

On Monday, we actually engaged with WorkSafe to ensure that our approach was consistent with their WorkSafe alert. We took samples of the sand from a small number of schools and we sent them for testing. We are waiting for that advice, and I understand that testing may come back today.

We then undertook a survey of over 200 sites to commence the understanding of the extent of the product used throughout the state, including our schools and CFLCs.

Yesterday morning, I chaired a meeting of all our principals and some school business managers and managers from our CFLCs to provide that advice. We then commenced ringing around all those schools. We asked for these principals and school business managers to fill out the survey so we could commence details with them about the extent of that sand in the school.

We've been working with those schools ever since. We provided them details yesterday afternoon. One was, where schools had no issues with the sand - the seven days since the use - they were outside of that parameter, so they didn't have to take any action other than the advice we'd already provided.

Then we started to work with those schools where they had been using the sand in the last seven days. That was to isolate the area, to relocate the classrooms. If they couldn't relocate the classrooms, that's when we needed to think about either closing partial classrooms or partially closing the schools, or closing the school in full.

Mr WILLIE - Within a Tasmanian context, minister, the response was slow. When WorkSafe updated the advice for duty holders, you saw schools in the Catholic and independent sectors act straight away, and we had a delayed response from the state system.

Were you pushing back on WorkSafe's advice? It seemed yesterday, in your press release in the morning, you were relying on other advice. You pointed out the federal Health advice

saying that the health risk is low. You've talked about ACCC. Why didn't you act on WorkSafe's advice, like the other sectors?

Ms PALMER - I think it's important to remember that first of all, we are dealing with a low-risk situation. This is not an emergency situation. We did not get information from WorkSafe or the ACCC or the Commonwealth Department of Health, or our own health officials, to say that this was high-risk. If it had been high-risk, it would have warranted a completely different response. If it had been medium-risk, I think we would have had a very different response, but all the advice we were getting was that this was low-risk. This was the same advice that was going to the ACT that shut multiple schools very quickly, and the same advice going to Western Australia, where they saw fit - from when I checked last night - to not have any school closures.

We looked at this from a very measured perspective. We looked at all the advice that was coming into us, and we made a decision based on that. Again, if this had been a high-risk situation, even a medium-risk situation, there would have been a very different response. This was a low-risk situation.

It would be inappropriate for me to speak on behalf of one independent school that might have made a decision to close. It would be inappropriate for me to speak on behalf of Catholic Education Tasmania, who made the decision when they made the decision. We based our decision on the expert information that we were getting, and I think that was a very reasonable expectation for us to have.

Our focus has been on making sure that we are communicating to our families, we're communicating to our staff and our workforce, reiterating that closing schools is a massive thing to do. This has been a huge decision, and the logistics around it are enormous. We need to make sure that we're responding by closing schools because we believe that aligns with the precautionary measures we need to take - but we don't want to be alarming people that this is a high-risk situation. It's not - it's low-risk. We've taken a measured, carefully thought-through process based on the advice that we had.

I can't speak to why a group of other schools took a different action. In the same way, I can't speak for why Western Australia isn't seeing fit to close any schools.

Mr WILLIE - It's within a Tasmanian context because you're abiding by WorkSafe, so you can point out other states all you like. This is about Tasmania. Your response has been delayed within the Tasmanian context. Was it delayed because you were pushing back on the WorkSafe advice? I'm sure you would agree that no exposure to asbestos is safe. I understand the hesitancy to close schools, I totally get that, but what we're seeing in Tasmania is a delayed response from the state system, and I'm trying to understand why. Did you try to get WorkSafe to change their advice?

Ms PALMER - I'm going to push back on your wording there of 'a delayed response'. This was not a delayed response.

Mr WILLIE - It is compared to other sectors.

Ms PALMER - When we got the advice from ACCC, we immediately began communicating with our schools, with the advice from the ACCC. We were responding last

week, when this began. There has been no delay to any response whatsoever. This has been a carefully managed, a reasonable and a cautious response based on advice that we were getting.

We reached out to WorkSafe Tasmania. We had some advice that came in on their website that we wanted to get some clarification around. It was really good to have that clarification, because WorkSafe was able to explain to us that the wording that they were using for families, for parents at home, or carers, grandparents - they needed to have a certain type of wording for them which may differ a little to what regulators and schools and departments would perhaps respond to in a situation like this. It was really good to get that clarification from WorkSafe.

Then, based on the discussion we had with them, we kept progressing through, 'Okay, what do we need to do?' The first thing we felt that was so important, that we needed to understand was, what was the situation in Tasmania? That is why the department, in 24 hours, was able to pull together an audit of over 200 sites.

The situation the Secretary and the deputy secretaries at this table were in is that the 200 sites were all different and could all require a different response. In 24 hours, they took that information, they turned it around and they should be congratulated for that and certainly our school leaders on the ground, our principals, our school business managers who filled in that survey and got that information back to us.

Because at the same time we engage the services of the accredited asbestos assessor who was able to be looking at that information as it came in, which meant we were in a really strong position to have all the information of - this is exactly what it looks like in Tasmania across our 200 sites that are all managed separately, all managed individually, all have their own school business managers and principals - collate all that information, work with our accredited asbestos expert and then come to a position where yesterday we were able to say, 'Okay, here's what the advice that's coming to us from the asbestos expert says, and I'll ask the secretary to speak through that advice and how we responded.'

Mr WILLIE - Could you answer my question, which is did you and the department try and get WorkSafe to change their advice?

Ms PALMER - No, we asked for clarification. We rang and we asked for clarification of the advice that we saw on the website. I think we would all accept that you can read the written word and you get so much more understanding if you can actually speak to someone and ask for clarification.

Mr BAYLEY - Minister, a quick, overarching question. In the past 18 months, have you, as an individual, been subject of, or party to any Supreme Court matters, and/or have you had your individual legal costs covered by taxpayer dollars?

Ms PALMER - No, I haven't.

Mr BAYLEY - Neither of those questions? Not subject to Supreme Court matters or taxpayer dollars?

Ms PALMER - Not that I'm aware of, Mr Bayley.

PUBLIC

Mr BAYLEY - Thank you. In relation to the coloured sand matters, the first, I understand, schools were communicated about this was Friday at 10.46 a.m. when a message went out to all principals which basically said that - and I'll read this into the record:

Please be aware that the following products have been recalled by the ACCC due to the possibility that they may contain asbestos. See the detailed recall notices attached.

It lists the different products,

Note: respirable asbestos has not been detected in any of the tested samples. The release of respirable asbestos fibres is unlikely to occur in its current state unless the sand is processed by mechanical means such as crushing or pulverising. The risk that any asbestos found is likely to be airborne or fine enough for inhalation is low.

And gave some instructions,

What you should do if you have these products. One: stop using the products immediately. Two: place the sand in a heavy-duty plastic bag and double tape it securely and keep it out of reach of children. Three: do not dispose of the product in general waste. Information on the disposal of asbestos waste, including disposal facilities, can be found on the Asbestos and Silica Safety and Eradication Agency website.

It gave some contacts at the Officeworks and organisational safety. That was on Friday at 10.46 a.m., but the first public communication about this was a media release from you yesterday, which was that the school audit was undertaken over the sand, recall. Why did it take so long to make a public comment from you as minister about this issue, which you have acknowledged while the risk is low, is an alarming situation? When anyone hears the words asbestos, alarm bells ring, and rightly so. Why did it take until yesterday at 12.14 p.m. before you actually made public statements about this and spoke more broadly to the community about this issue?

Ms PALMER - I think our focus was very much on communicating with our schools. That needed to be our primary focus. There was certainly numerous media reports nationally that were coming out in light of this. My first priority in that instance was to be communicating with my secretary and my department and to make sure we were communicating with our schools, as more information came to bear, I turned my attention to media releases coming out from me. My focus was communicating with our school leaders and our workforce and making sure that they had the information about how to manage the product. Again, that was complicated in itself, because there were varying forms of the product. Was it sealed? Wasn't it sealed? That was absolutely where my focus was and my priority.

Mr BAYLEY - Yesterday's relief references the incident management team. When was that actually stood up?

Ms PALMER - I will hand that question to the secretary.

PUBLIC

Ms WEBSTER - We had an incident, but the Work Health and Safety Team stood up around this on the Friday, obviously, but from an incident management perspective, it was Monday that we stood up - a small team within the department.

Mr BAYLEY - Within the department? Why did you wait until Monday to do that, and not Friday afternoon?

Ms WEBSTER - The advice on Friday was from the ACCC and then we were following all those instructions. When we realised this was going to be a wider, whole-of-agency response needed after the advice from WorkSafe, we then stood the incident management team up.

Mr BAYLEY - You didn't think on the basis of -

CHAIR - Mr Bayley, you've had your allotted questions. Prof Razay.

Prof RAZAY - Honourable minister, as you're aware, I became interested in politics three years ago. One of my favourite topics apart from health, was education. When I looked at our education standard, I was surprised that based on the National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) result, I found that students in Tasmania have fallen behind most states in reading, spelling and numeracy. When we compare them to a standard in 2008 - our own standard - it also continues to decline. That totally surprised me, despite changing curriculum and spending more on schools per student.

What's happened to our education system? All my children studied in public schools in the 2000s and I always pride myself about the best education system in Australia, so I was totally surprised. I would like you to update me about our education status. Why? What happened?

Ms PALMER - Thank you, very much. Like you, I had a wonderful public school education as well. I would say that it's really interesting when you look at the educational outcomes that we are seeing across education and our student outcomes, and then you look at the extraordinary work that's been done in this space. It's been so well resourced, we've never seen this sort of investment in education as we've seen in recent years. Our teachers are exceptional and we have wonderful workforce. We have had some great reforms that have come together - the Lifting Literacy which we are really starting to see the benefits of now, we've had that over the last few years. Yet, we were still looking at the data - our literacy, our numeracy didn't seem to be reflecting the incredible workforce that is really well resourced. We had a huge investment in brand new schools, in redevelopment of schools; and a huge investment in keeping children safe in schools. We started to really look at what is the education system that sits over education? Not just necessarily what's just happening in our schools, but what is our education system looking like?

I had the extraordinary opportunity to go to the UK with the Grattan researchers from the Grattan Institute, with the Susan McKinnon Foundation - our Deputy Secretary, Trudy Pearce, was with me on that journey with other departments' staff. We went with the team from the Victorian Government as well, and we were able to see a really different system of education. What we learnt from the incredible body of research from the Grattan Institute was that sometimes you actually have to look at a system - a system that's delivering education - and, are there things we could be looking at there, that we could implement here in Tasmania?

Based on that study tour and based on the extensive research from the Grattan Institute, we will be trialling, commencing next year, a new education system for Tasmania. It will involve multi-school organisations and groupings of schools. The pilot will start small, just with three schools in a multi-school organisation and alongside that we will be grouping our other schools together. This is really about looking at some of the feedback that I've received from schools when I've been visiting in my time as Education minister - administrative workload, the department's a big department and there were times when school leaders were having to make three, four or five phone calls to try to find their way to the right person.

We are looking at grouping our schools together so that they will be really tightly aligned across administration and curriculum, and there'll be so much more - well, the word that comes to mind is 'power,' with a family of schools, to be able to respond, to be able to teach, to be able to pull together their resources for the betterment of our children. We know we've had some great reforms in Tasmania. The Independent Education Review said to us, 'If there's one thing, stay focused on literacy.' We know that we've done some great things there with our phonics checks.

It's about pulling all of those reforms together and saying, how do we now really empower our schools, our principals and our teachers? Certainly, through the work that we're doing with our multi-school organisations. We saw the evidence in the UK. We saw schools, one in particular, that was listed as the worst school in England. There was a six-part documentary on this school. We were at the school six years later and it was an outstanding school. It had changed that workforce, it had changed those students, and it was changing that community. We saw something really special, and we thought, 'can we take the very best of that reform and how can we apply that in a Tasmanian setting?'

We will be commencing our trial at the beginning of next year. We're super excited and it's been wonderful to see the enthusiasm of the three principals who will be involved in that multi-school organisation trial. At the same time, all of our other government schools are going into groupings to prepare them to move into a multi-school organisation family.

Mr GARLAND - Minister, on 6 October, the Chair of the School Association of the North West Support School wrote to you and the Premier outlining their concerns with the co-located public hydrotherapy pool at the Burnie campus. Have you responded to this letter, why was the decision made without any consultation with the School Association and families, and why were they not informed before this proposal was publicly announced during the election campaign?

Ms PALMER - I will seek some advice on the specifics of your question. I will say that hydrotherapy pools, in particular, can have great benefit, but they are very expensive, not just to build, but to maintain and operate. We really wanted to look at how we could ensure that we have a hydrotherapy pool for that particular school for the benefit of the students, but how can we benefit the rest of the community as well? We know our schools are shut on weekends, they're shut across almost three months of the year with school holidays - sorry, two and a half months of the year with school holidays; so how can we utilise an expensive facility for the benefit of the community?

We also made it very clear when we entered into this agreement that the first priority is to the school. It was also important to me that any agreement we made, that any community access would not impact on school workload and that the school would not be responsible for

PUBLIC

booking it for external groups or managing that side of it. We're working through that now with a memorandum of understanding that's going to be developed between Education, Children and Young People and with the Department of Health. As I say, we will absolutely be prioritising our students in that area.

In regard to the letter that you mentioned, I am aware that that letter has come into my office and I believe we are in the process of responding.

Mr WILLIE - Have you engaged with that community?

Ms PALMER - I beg your pardon?

Mr WILLIE - Have you been up there and engaged with them?

Ms PALMER - I have certainly been to visit our support schools on a number of occasions which has been fantastic.

Mr WILLIE - On this issue?

Ms PALMER - The process around this is a stock-standard process and I might ask the secretary to speak to that but there's certainly a high level of engagement with the community whenever there's a new development. That's part of normal process.

Ms WEBSTER - Yes, thank you, through you, minister. The key is that we want to make sure that we prioritise the use for the school, during school time. We don't want to add to the admin burden of the school, and I believe the minister's outlined that we'll be able to keep that separate, that we'll be able to work with Disability Services, the Department of Health, those sorts of stakeholders. We don't want to place any of that additional burden on the school. I certainly have talked to the principal about that, and I know that the Deputy Secretary Schools and Early Years has also done that on several occasions. I also want to be really clear that the priority will be for our children in that support school, during school hours.

Mr SHELTON - Minister, it's great to be here and welcome to the table.

Going on from the conversation of Prof Razay, you were talking about the multi-school organisations (MSOs) and so forth, going forward. Obviously there's some work already gone into that. We're late in the school year and so anything that's happening next year, there's been some organisational work done and so forth. I'm interested if you could explain just a little bit - you would have been talking to the principals of these schools and their thoughts and feedback heading into it. It is exciting and, I can tell by your voice, that you're excited about the trial. Could you inform us a little bit more about the trial and what the principals of those schools have fed back to you?

Ms PALMER - I know that you have an interest in this as a parent and a grandparent of many grandchildren. You're absolutely right, there is quite a level of excitement around this reform and for our schools to have that understanding that this isn't a reform that's been placed in their lap, this is about education system reform, which is really important. We've certainly seen internationally, MSOs have lifted student achievement, they've lifted teacher satisfaction and system performance. The Grattan Institute has recommended their trial right across Australia and, for us here in Tasmania, we see extraordinary opportunity to change those

educational outcomes for our students and to change outcomes for our teachers as well. We are leading the nation in this innovative reform.

The first Tasmanian MSO will commence from term 1 in 2026. That involves three schools: Moonah, New Town and Risdon Vale primary schools. And, I can tell you the principals of those schools are very excited about being involved. They recently spoke, at what we call a drop-in session, about the MSOs and they were able to share some of their thoughts and expectations with other educators who attended. Some of the comments that we saw from them, first of all, the opportunity that they see around collaboration and the comments that came out of that drop-in session, 'We are already seeing ourselves as a collective and talking about students within the multi-school organisation rather than the students just within our individual schools.' And another comment, 'We've been utilising each other's knowledge and experience and benefiting from that.' This is happening almost organically before we've even begun the trial with these three schools who are now getting ready to go into the trial.

They also shared a bit about their vision, the strategy and clarity and some of the comments that came from our principals on that. There's been a lot of research into the background and it's been a wonderful opportunity to shape something that will change outcomes for students. We've been meeting regularly to work on our education strategy and other supporting documents that can provide clarity around our priorities. They also are really spruiking the benefits around improving teaching and learning. It's been exciting to shape something that is going to change outcomes for students and improve our teachers' pedagogy. Our kindergarten and early childhood teams are really excited about raising the standard in Heggerty Phonemic Awareness and the oral language space. They also talk a lot about strengthening practice. A comment:

Often we are working by ourselves in our own time, creating the same things off the side of the desk, and in between running around doing everything else that a principal has to do, it's hard to get momentum behind some of the great ideas that people across our system have. I think one of the really exciting spaces for us in middle leadership and how we are part of a team where there's someone else doing a very similar role at another school, and we could be going back and forth and having those conversations and actually meeting with each other and developing something that's better and something that's indeed stronger.

Also comments around positive culture and professional growth:

Support from like-minded people has really energised our staff and it's the relationships that have started already. We've had teachers, some beginning teachers from Risdon Vale who've been able to go out and watch more experienced teachers at New Town, and they're able to set up those wonderful relationships. We know how important mentoring is, especially for our newer educators in the space.

This is just such encouraging feedback, and it's feedback that's coming from our principals that they are hearing from their teachers and their staff on the ground. They are super excited to be part of our very first Tasmanian MSO. Of course, as we move through the trial period, we'll be setting up other MSOs around the state and having schools join the MSOs that are already established. In all of this, it is all about improving those outcomes for our students

PUBLIC

and absolutely ensuring that we are improving outcomes and the environment for our teachers. It's a very exciting time. Thank you.

Mr WILLIE - Minister, the WorkSafe advice for duty holders says that they need to arrange for qualified inspection, sampling, remediation and clearance by an independent licensed asbestos assessor, licensed asbestos removalist, based on the asbestos type and risk profile, and subsequent removal or remediation works must be undertaken as guided by the licensed person. How many licensed people operate within Tasmania and how long is it going to take to get around 45 schools?

Ms PALMER - How long it's going to take to get around 45 schools is certainly something that we're spending a lot of time talking about and looking at. We will certainly be triaging our response in accordance to schools that have been most heavily impacted, where we've had to shut schools, and then moving through to schools where there may have been a partial closure. For the operational detail, I will hand to the secretary.

Ms WEBSTER - Thank you. That's correct, we'll be working school by school. Mr Willie, the other thing that will inform our decision will be the additional advice that's coming out around the testing and what level of cleaning that we need to go to. We're currently doing that work, as is the Catholic education system; we're working with them.

Mr WILLIE - Who are ahead of the state system.

Ms WEBSTER - I'd like to just point out that we actually took action on the Friday and we were working with our schools, so to say that we didn't take any action is not correct.

Mr WILLIE - I'm talking about in terms of engaging these licensed specialists, they would have been doing that the day before.

Ms WEBSTER - And we did that on Monday. I just want to be really clear that we absolutely took the proportionate action for the low level of risk. The advice from that expert is that the actions that we are taking is absolutely the right - is very sound and it's proportionate to the risk level and it provides a really good opportunity to minimise any harm that could be there.

We are currently working with that expert to determine what level of cleaning is required for each school. That will take as long as it takes, really, because we want to make sure that we follow that advice and we open the schools as quickly as we can. We also will watch to see if WorkSafe, or other jurisdictions - whether they change that advice as they go, because as we learn more about this, we will be alive to what changes we might need to make. As the minister said, there's currently everyone looking at this across Australia. We're working as hard as we can. Our aim will be to open those schools as quickly as we can, but as safely as we can.

Mr WILLIE - How many licensed specialists are there in Tasmania to deal with this?

Ms WEBSTER - I don't - it would most likely be on the WorkSafe website. Our work health and safety people would know that exact number and we're currently working with WorkSafe. We're working through this as a team, but I don't have the exact number.

Mr WILLIE - So schools could be closed for a number of days, minister?

PUBLIC

Ms PALMER - I'm not going to get into a guessing scenario. We are working with the expert information that we have. We are doing what is in the best interests of our students and what is in the best interests of our workforce. It would be irresponsible for me to play a guessing game. Our priority is safety of our workforce, safety of our students and we will work through this diligently and carefully.

We absolutely want our schools back open; we want our students to be learning. We don't want this disruption, but we are not immune to what is happening right across Australia. We are working at great pace to ensure that we are following the advice of our experts and that we get our schools opened as soon as we can.

Mr WILLIE - There are other states that are allowing miscellaneous leave. Is that something that the government's looking at in terms of the impact across the public service, but you can talk for your own department. There would be school staff that would be impacted by this. Are you looking at miscellaneous leave and other ways that you could allow them to manage this?

Ms WEBSTER - Staff are absolutely entitled to carers leave and as secretary I can authorise other leave as required, and I'd certainly consider that on a case-by-case basis and I've always done that.

Mr WILLIE - If they don't have carers leave available to them?

Ms WEBSTER - Absolutely. I'd always do that, Mr Willie.

Mr BAYLEY - Minister, I want to take you back to the email of Friday 14 November 10.46 a.m.. I completely accept your commitment to safety of your workforce and that you are a duty holder here. I want to ask though, given asbestos is such a serious issue and I think implicitly we all know it needs to be handled by professionals, why was instruction sent out to staff in schools to handle this themselves, to deal with it themselves, in terms of those three steps I read out earlier: stop using the products; place the sand in in a heavy-duty plastic bag and double tape it; do not dispose of the product in in general waste. Why was that the case? I completely accept stop using the products immediately. But then you instruct staff to actually take things into their own hands, potentially placing them at some risk.

Ms PALMER - So again, I will remind you: very low risk, and it's important that we do keep reiterating that it is a low-risk situation. What I will say is that the information that we sent out to schools was in line with the advice from the ACCC, and probably important to also note that that was the same advice that was going to the community from the ACCC, because this wasn't just a product that was in schools; this was a product that could have been in the home of anyone, anywhere in Tasmania. That was the advice going to the community, it was the advice that we made sure was going directly into our schools.

Mr BAYLEY - I accept that the ACCC, on 12 November, so two days before you sent this email, absolutely did say to stop, bag and double tape these products; they also said, though, that when in doing so in an abundance of caution, customers should take precautions such as wearing disposable gloves and a mask.

The WorkSafe advice, which was last updated on 14 November, so the same day this email was sent, I don't know whether it was before the email or after the email, actually has as

PUBLIC

step two - you've got number one, stop using the product. As step two WorkSafe says wear protective gear, disposable gloves, P2-related mask, protective eyewear, step three double bag it, and that's where you go to. Why weren't staff advised to wear PPE when it comes to handling this product? That's kind of rule 101 when it comes to dealing with asbestos, isn't it? Yet you've told them to stop using it, put it in a heavy double plastic bag and double tape it and then don't dispose of it. Where was the duty of care to staff to protect themselves from this product?

Ms PALMER - Again, I will continue to reiterate that this is a low-risk assessment -

Mr BAYLEY - The advice does say wear PPE.

Ms PALMER - I will tell you that we sent out that email, I don't have the exact time, but I think you referred to -

Mr BAYLEY - 10.46?

Ms PALMER - 10.46. The advice you're talking about from WorkSafe, we didn't have that advice at that stage.

Mr BAYLEY - But you referred to the ACCC.

Ms PALMER - That advice came -

Mr BAYLEY - You referred to the ACCC advice from 12 November two days before, which says:

Stop, bag, double tape. When doing so, in abundance of caution, customers should take precautions such as wearing disposable gloves and a mask.

Ms PALMER - I'm advised that the information the department sent out was in line with the advice from the ACCC. Advice that came through from WorkSafe Tasmania came through much later in the day. I don't know if there's any detail, the secretary can add to that answer.

Mr BAYLEY - I draw you to the attention of the ACCC website, which does refer to PPE.

Ms WEBSTER - The email had the ACCC advice attached to it as well, Mr Bayley.

Mr BAYLEY - With respect, you've given staff instructions: no. one, stop; no. two deal with the product, place it in a heavy-duty plastic bag. The advice that I see here basically says stop, protect yourself and then deal with the product. What happened to the 'protect yourself' element to these instructions?

Ms PALMER - Yes, and as I said, the email was sent to staff at 10.46, the recall advice was also attached to that. The other thing that I would like to add was that the advice from WorkSafe came out at 4.59 on Friday, after we'd sent that.

Mr BAYLEY - But the minister, with respect, was referring to the ACCC advice, 12 November.

PUBLIC

CHAIR - Mr Bayley. Next round, Prof Razay.

Prof RAZAY - The current Budget revealed workers compensation costs rising dramatically due to physical and psychological injuries. Can you tell us about what proportion of people claim for compensation, and what proportion is physical and psychological?

Ms PALMER - Thank you very much for that question. We certainly know that the pressures on our education workforce are very different today, to what they may have been in years gone past. We care deeply for our teachers - they turn up every day, they inspire our children and our young people. I'm yet to meet someone who can't say 'my life changed because of that teacher', or 'I made this decision because of that teacher'. We know the important role that they play. For some children, it's that one adult in their life who is there for them on a regular basis.

I will refer to the Secretary around the data questions that you're asking, but I will say we certainly have a number of initiatives in place that arrange squarely at supporting our teachers and improving their wellbeing, because obviously we want to see a reduction in workers compensation. There's a number of initiatives that we have established - one is our School Staff Wellbeing Response Team, that's actually been funded through the Better and Fairer Schools Agreement that we were able to secure with the Australian Government. That's really a team that is absolutely dedicated to supporting staff, to working closely with principles to build a proactive wellbeing culture and to strengthen each school's capacity to support its workforce now and into the future. I will ask the Secretary to comment on the data aspect of your question.

Ms WEBSTER - We're after the number of active workers compensation claims as at 30 September - we had 394 active claims across the department, 317 of those were for education. The annual report also reports on our financial data, which was including our return to work plans for 2024-25, which was 287. I know there was commentary around there being 122 teachers completely off work due to workers compensation, that is not the correct number. We do have in the last pay period in October, 79 teachers who were receiving workers compensation payments and also receiving some return to work and medical expenses only. That is the correct figure as of the 30th, the last pay period in October.

Prof RAZAY - Can you tell us how much in dollars it's costing the budget over the last year?

Ms PALMER - I'll just seek some advice on that for you. Just see if we've got that information at the table.

Ms WEBSTER - Through you, minister. Yes, we do. The workers compensation premiums, we don't include by output necessarily. We just have a global figure. In 2024-25, the total figure was \$24,760,139.

Mr SHELTON - Minister, I understand that you've announced \$12 million that will be invested this year to supercharge literacy resources across the schools. Can you please explain how this investment will be spent and how you determine the resources that will be provided over that time?

Ms PALMER - Thank you very much for that question. Our Tasmanian government schools are receiving more support for literacy, which is through the \$12 million injection of

funding. That was delivered through the Better and Fairer Schools Agreement that was secured with the Australian Government last year.

We know that our approach to lifting literacy is the right approach and that was certainly noted in the findings and the recommendations from the review of education in Tasmania, where Vicki Baylis was very strong in saying 'stay the course, you're on the right track'.

Through our Lifting Literacy plan and most especially through the hard work of principals and teachers in our schools, we are putting the foundation in place to ensure that our learners of today and those into the future have the best possible chance for success. It's important to ensure that every teacher and leader not only has the skills, knowledge, and capability to make transformational change needed as part of this commitment to lifting literacy, but that they also have the resources that will support this.

We were really excited to be able to roll out the supercharging of literacy resources to our schools. That funding included four schools' relief or additional hours so that teacher assistants and support staff can undertake training in structured evidence-based literacy instruction. Resources to support the delivery of youth life foundations and word origins in Prep to Year 8 classrooms.

We had subscriptions to Ochre resources to support English curriculum instruction for students from years 3-8. I think what's also important is that we had some schools who'd already gone out and purchased some of those online resources, so we reimburse them as part of this \$12 million package.

We had class book sets to support the teaching of English, including year three classes receiving class sets of the Tasmanian Aboriginal book here on Sea Country and a text based unit to support delivery of the English curriculum. Teachers have been provided with additional fluency passages to support students practise their reading and instructional videos - how to use them in the classroom. Every school has been provided a document camera to enhance engagement in literacy lessons. Staff also have access to StoryBox, library collection, and the Sora app to provide students with access to more digital books and resources. We put decodable readers for every prep to year 2 class into our classrooms and into the hands of our teachers.

We direct school resource allocation for consumables. Word origin manuals have been provided to years 7 and 8 classes to support intervention in high schools because high schools function quite differently to our primary schools. So this was a way of ensuring that if there has been a young person who has somehow fallen behind, now they find themselves in high school, there was an opportunity for us to be supporting schools in an intervention space there.

Kindergarten teachers are supported with training and curriculum resources to explicitly teach phonological awareness and our department is also working on Orca education to develop text based units to support the delivery of the English curriculum from Prep right through to Year 10. This includes the recent release of a reading spine for English which is a collection of high-quality books that schools can read out loud to to students.

The resources were really carefully chosen after consultation with our schools, we really went out and said this is a recommendation from the independent review. We know that the reform in literacy is really having inroads. What do you need? What can we give to you? What can we get for you that will actually almost give you a superpower in this area?

PUBLIC

The work we did here was very much the voice of teachers, the voice of schools. To find out what was the variety of ways we could really support them and that was done through a number of ways. It was done through school visits, direct feedback forms and face-to-face feedback sessions.

The supercharging literacy resources were not only informed by this feedback but also took into account the importance of implementing our lifting literacy plan at a measured, and at a sustainable pace for our schools. We want to ensure there is a long-term sustainability focus on these reforms.

Not just me but our whole team, we couldn't be prouder of what our teachers are doing, and we spend time with them. I think you know, you're on the right track when you turn up to visit a school, and before the principals even got to you and said hello, I'm such and such, the literacy expert has run to the front of the gate to say, look at what my kids are doing. That's just been wonderful to be able to share in that level of excitement on the ground in our schools.

What's really important about the work we're doing in literacy and what's really important about this particular supercharging of this resource is that we want these to be available to every teacher in every school for the benefit of every child. Thank you very much.

Mr WILLIE - Minister, just as this hearing is taking place, I'm getting messages from parents. One parent just said that her daughter was playing with the sand on Friday at Launching into Learning. Another parent has asked whether a licenced inspector will go to every school today and when you will update parents about school closures for tomorrow?

Ms PALMER - Yes, certainly the communication in this space will be absolutely key. Some of your questions are operational questions and I will refer them to the secretary. We know that communicating will be absolutely key. I have an office full of mums, there are, there are mums and dads, right across, carers, grandparents who need this information and we certainly have a really clear focus on ensuring we are communicating with families, but for us that we are communicating with schools.

Because we know that our schools are the ones best placed to have those direct communication lines with families. Again, if you have any schools or you're getting any feedback that you have a school - that they are saying to you, look, we, we don't know what's happening. You have my number, get them to call me. We will get that information to them.

We are doing everything we can to work across all the 200 sites that could have been impacted. We're doing everything we can to keep our information flowing to the schools. I'm not going to pretend that budget Estimates has not fallen at a really difficult time for what we're trying to do, so we are here as a team being accountable and and transparent through this process.

Mr WILLIE - And I'm asking you questions on behalf of parents who want information.

Ms PALMER - We have another team we've pulled them off other tasks to have them on this to ensure that we have those communications going out. I think you had a question.

Mr WILLIE - Whether a licenced person will visit every school today, that's impacted, and when you will update families and schools about school closures for tomorrow?

PUBLIC

Ms WEBSTER - Yes. To answer that question, we've got an emergency operations group meeting, and I don't want that to sound alarmist - sorry - but that's our standard process when something affects the whole of agency as this does. They're standing up at 12.15 p.m. today to progress what needs to happen for tomorrow in terms of those licenced assessors. We will be working through that process school-by-school and prioritising. As I said, the main priority is to get to schools that are are closed and then work through partially closed because that's our aim, to get those schools updated and opened as soon as we can. I don't have the actual level of detail in terms of the sequencing or which schools they will be going to today, but certainly after our meeting at 12.15 p.m. I should have a bit more information about what is actually happening on the ground.

Mr WILLIE - On Friday you were relying on education facility attendants to bag up some of the sand. They have a resource allocation from 1997. Do you think that's fair, minister?

Ms PALMER - We need to be clear with that with regard to how education facilities and how the communities and families were asked to manage this situation which was very much rooted in the expert advice from the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission.

With regard to your question around our facility attendants, I will hand to the secretary.

Ms WEBSTER - We're going through a process at the moment, Mr Willie, with those educational facility attendants and working through their situation from an industrial perspective.

Mr WILLIE - We saw schools close because the government hasn't moved on that resource allocation among other things. Has there been any progress whatsoever? It's an outdated allocation from 1997. Those staff are under a lot of pressure of what they have to do each day. I've engaged with them across schools. I want to know whether there's been any progress.

Ms PALMER - I will hand that to the secretary and to the deputy secretary, but I will say we're really grateful for the work they do. They are imperative to the structure and how schools are managed. I have certainly very much appreciated the opportunity that I've had to meet with some of our representatives directly and to hear from them directly. That certainly has been conversations and information I fed back into the department based on those conversations that I've had directly with them.

Ms WEBSTER - I have also met with the representation from the education facility attendants and the United Workers Union (UWU). We absolutely want this to move as quickly as we can. I have given a commitment to the UWU we will move through this as quickly as we can and getting towards a resolution next year. I have asked the Deputy Secretary, People and Culture to lead that work in particular, and I know that she met with them yesterday afternoon, I believe it was.

Ms McKERRACHER - For the last two months I've been meeting with the UWU and with their members who are our education facility attendants, and we've been talking about their role as cleaners, grounds people, kitchen assistants and maintenance people. It has been eye opening to see the work that they do. This is a group of about 850 people who work right across our schools. They put so much effort, so much care into our schools. They keep everywhere looking clean, tidy and they do the grounds, they do the polishing of the gym floors.

PUBLIC

This is a group of people who are often unseen but really deserve our respect and attention and value. It has been a very interesting couple of months meeting with them.

We're having conversations across three areas. Obviously, there's the formal industrial bargaining around salaries and conditions. We have also entered into formal bargaining around the job security agreement. That's still at the earlier stages, but we are discussing that. The most exciting thing is we've also identified areas that we can deal with that are non-agreement matters where we can actually hopefully work together to make their lives a little bit easier, a little bit better, because they are called on for all sorts of things.

If you think back to COVID times, they were actually the people who did that work for us. We are not suggesting that we're asking them to do this work because there is specialist training. You need PPE.

Mr WILLIE - Clearly, on Friday they were doing some of this work. We do rely on them in these sorts of situations, minister. They were doing this work on Friday. We've relied on them in COVID. This is a matter of urgency to update that agreement.

Ms PALMER - Yes. As the deputy secretary has very clearly articulated, we are at the table, we are absolutely engaging in those conversations.

Mr BAYLEY - Minister, I acknowledge the advice is that the risk was low in relation to this coloured sand incident. As it stands today, we've got 40 schools closed. We've got extra expert consultants engaged and licenced assessors and we've just heard the emergency operations group is to be stood up at 12.15 p.m. It has escalated, and it is a significant and serious issue.

I want to go back to the e-mail. I guess your responsibility to keep staff including those education facility attendance and ask again around why they weren't advised around using respirators and protective gear? You know you mentioned the ACCC advice and on 12 November in relation to this incident it advised that when doing so in an abundance of caution customers should take precautions such as wearing disposable gloves and a mask. If you click through to the ACCC advice on dealing with asbestos more generally, it's really clear as well. It's just a standard page, so I assume it was there on 14 November, and it says stop using it. If it's still packaged, put it in a bag. Clean up sites and wear gloves, masks and disposable coveralls.

I guess again, given the department was sending out explicit instructions to departmental staff to deal with this issue themselves as opposed to the department engaging a professional.

What happened to the advice around protecting themselves when handling this product?

Ms PALMER - Thank you very much for the question and for the line of questioning. I do appreciate you reiterating this is a low risk. We don't want people feeling frightened and we don't want them feeling scared. It might have been Mr Willie - perhaps it was you - who mentioned we hear the word 'asbestos', and it immediately brings up certain feelings and can be quite frightening.

Mr BAYLEY - As it should.

PUBLIC

Ms PALMER - To be clear, all the advice that's come to us is that this is low risk. I'm going to keep saying that because it's important that we don't have people being unnecessarily scared in this space.

With regard to the letter that the department sent, it was based on the ACCC advice. It was from the secretary. I will ask the secretary to respond.

Ms WEBSTER - Through you, minister. Just to confirm, it was from our Work Health and Safety area; that's where we would normally do that. My understanding is that the ACCC advice at the recall notice at 9.33 didn't include the specific information about PPE. I would have to take that on notice around the particular timing of all of that. But that's my understanding and I have seen that recall notice and that particular notice that we used to inform that message at 10.46 didn't include that particular PPE, but there were links to the other information on their website.

Mr BAYLEY - I can't talk to whether it was. I take it at face value of course that that was the case. But you click through to their information around disposal advice, and it is there, I think almost by default. We as people now know that if you are dealing with asbestos, you either need to get a professional to deal with it or make sure you are adequately protected. I do still question as to why that advice wasn't provided to staff.

Do you know how many staff responded to this instruction and actually took matters into their hands as suggested and dealt with this incident in their schools? How many people were involved directly with this product, and do you know how many of them researched individually or inherently knew they needed to protect themselves when dealing with this product and wore PPE? And how many didn't?

CHAIR - Through the minister, please, Mr Bayley.

Ms PALMER - Thank you, Mr Bayley. I'll seek some advice as to that level of detail and what we may or may not have here at the table.

We don't have that level of detail with us at the moment and the secretary has advised me it would take quite a considerable effort to get that level of detail. Our focus at the moment is following the expert advice that we've got and ensuring that we're communicating with our schools, our principals, our families, and following all the advice that we are aware of, but I don't know that we could get you that level of detail.

Mr BAYLEY - I appreciate that; do you know whether education -

CHAIR - Sorry, time to move on. Prof Razay?

Prof RAZAY - Thank you, honourable minister. Given the rise in psychological injury and compensation claims among our teachers, and also the increased teacher-dropout in Tasmania, what are specific initiatives to lessen teacher workloads and therefore burnout? Particularly, what action can be taken to reduce the amount of administrative work and meetings teachers are required to attend, which take away from the time connecting with their students and colleagues?

Ms PALMER - Thank you very much. I will begin by addressing the part of your question around teacher workloads. I will tell you that over the past decade we have actually employed more than 1975 additional full-time FTE staff in education, and that number reflects an overall increase in permanent and fixed-term employees of 296.79 FTE from 31 March 2024.

We've seen that increase across our primary schools, our high schools, our combined schools and also our senior secondary schools. One of the things in that workload space that certainly became really apparent to me when I became Education minister, and was going around and visiting our schools and spending one-on-one time with our teachers and with our principals and groups as well, was just the admin burden that has been placed on teachers. We've become quite risk-averse, so there has to be a plan for everything, and you can see the benefits of that in some regards, you absolutely can. Also, we have to accept that things like that have placed an administrative burden on our schools.

I certainly made it a priority to reduce the workload of school staff, and I ask schools to specifically tell us as a department what would help to lighten their load, especially that administrative load. I called on the support and the help of the Australian Education Union as well, which was fantastic, because I'd had a number of conversations with them. Not only were we going out to teachers as a department asking this question, but the union also went out to its members asking the same questions, and then came back to me with a list of the top things that teachers were certainly telling them.

It was from that information that the department formed the making school time count initiative. This initiative will support greater learner outcomes by really freeing up that valuable time for principals to lead, and for teachers to be teaching.

Some of the actions under making school time count have been reducing administrative burden on principals and teachers to better coordinate and streamline requests and activities directed to schools, support DECYP business units to take a school-centric approach to the work that they do, and to actually be measuring the impacts of these changes on school workloads.

Some of the really direct actions include: we've been digitising and streamlining forms and processes and bringing different systems together into one place so that a teacher just has to go to one system and work with one system. We've also been reducing teacher admin tasks relating to student attendance with an online attendance knowledge hub that has been established, and that's drawing together research, advice and resources from right across DECYP.

We're also looking at what other jurisdictions are doing in this space. One of the recommendations from the independent review was that you don't have to recreate something from scratch, look at what's happening in other jurisdictions. We've certainly been doing that. As far as teacher admin tasks: a reduction in the workload, we know that that is at the core of our multi-school organisations and our groupings of schools. That's one of the great benefits of when you bring a family of schools together, that there's able to be a real sharing. One of the comments I read out from the principals involved in the trial is, across all these different schools, people are doing the same job off the side of a desk, so what can happen with collaboration in those spaces?

We've also been making it easier to meet compliance and reporting requirements. Some of the things that we've really looked at are: what are some of the things we could stop that we do because maybe we've always done them, but are they getting the outcomes? Are they still required? So having a real look at that. What can we make simpler and more efficient? How do we look at changing the way staff work and the processes that are used so that we can minimise that impact on schools and coordinate and prioritise actions as one system so that they are streamlined, and that they are phased and they are fit for purpose.

This has certainly been a real focus of mine. Through you, secretary, I think, Jen. We've actually stood up within the department a group that is really focused on this. Secretary, are you happy to talk?

Ms PEARCE - Absolutely. That's correct, minister. As the minister has indicated, there is a lot of work happening and, as part of that, we've put a small team within the agency working on that. It's probably against nine key theme areas, of which the minister has alluded to, around compliance management, lessening of tasks.

Another one is very much in the Lifting Literacy space. A lot of that has been thinking about how we can reduce workload and administration as we implement the Lifting Literacy initiative. Also, as part of that, we've been meeting regularly with the Australian Education Union (AEU). We have a teacher workload reference group which meets two times a term. Through 2025, we've been meeting with David Genford and his team of union representatives to talk about what the issues are from their perspective, and how can we work together to resolve those.

One of those has been work around learning plans for those students that need educational adjustments. Another has been around the systems that we have that support the administration of the work that teachers do, but also the outcomes for students, so very actively involved in this space.

Prof RAZAY - It's exciting to hear all these initiatives you have embarked on and also the enormous amount of resources you have put in. It's nice to monitor how you are progressing, like doing surveys or feedback, just to give us an idea of how you are progressing with that. Do we have anything like teacher satisfaction surveys, from time to time, just to see how you're progressing?

Ms PEARCE - Certainly, we are doing some analysis around that, and we've had the initial data and inputs that the minister talked about. We did our own survey and the AEU did their survey. By way of example, you may or may not be aware, but we have a Principal Matters circular that goes out to the principalship, which goes to the administrative practices they need to undertake to make sure they're up to speed and up-to-date with information. We had a 33 per cent reduction in term 3 on the amount of information that was going out to schools and the administrative requests as part of that.

We are continuing to collect data and information and we're working through the evaluation process about how we can do that systematically, through professional learning and getting advice, as well as a more systematic approach. We'll be talking to our teacher workload reference group about how we're going to collect that data as well.

PUBLIC

Ms PALMER - Excuse me, Chair. My apologies if this is not appropriate and I will retreat immediately, but we had a bit more to add to that for Prof Razay. Is that okay?

CHAIR - Okay, sure.

Ms BURGESS - Through you, minister. Just to assure you that we have an annual survey that goes out to all our teachers and our families. We do have the data for that, which does show an increase in satisfaction rating in 2025.

Prof RAZAY - Thank you.

Mr SHELTON - I seem to be following up Prof Razay fairly well here, because my question is around the Independent Review in Education, which you've mentioned already a couple of times this morning, minister. I know that you've accepted all the recommendations of that review and that is the focus of moving forward, similar to what Prof Razay was talking about. My question is around the actions and what's happening with that, and the implementation plan. Can you update us on the implementation plan, which will ensure the government achieves the commitments made, and in a timely fashion, around those implementations?

Ms PALMER - Thank you very much. It was quite extraordinary to start my time as the Minister for Education with a review like this. It was brilliant to be able to engage Vicki Baylis, who's an exceptional educator, and well-known across Australia. She's had significant work done in the Northern Territory. For her to be able to come with fresh eyes and look at our education system, and then to come back to me with findings and recommendations, was quite an extraordinary opportunity for me to begin my time with our department and in this role.

DECYP has been working hard on progressing the implementation plan for the Independent Education Review recommendations. I'm pleased that later today I will actually be releasing what that plan is, and having that go out for consultation so that we can get feedback on where we think we need to go. It's always great to get feedback on what we're planning to do. That implementation plan 2025-27 will set out what has already been achieved, but it also provides that clear roadmap about what full implementation of the findings and recommendations from the review will look like.

When I released my ministerial response to the review - I did that back in March - I identified four immediate priorities for the Department for Education, Children and Young People, and I'm really pleased to say there's been very strong progress against those areas. The four priorities were:

- Strengthening the existing Lifting Literacy initiative, which have spoken about a little bit, so that was, how do we supercharge this? It's been identified by the independent reviewer that you're on the right track, keep going, don't lose focus - so what do we do to bolster that work? We've spoken a little bit about how we got those practical tools out to teachers to try and reduce their workloads, to make sure that every teacher in every classroom had the resources that they need for the benefit of every child, so real continuity across the teaching of literacy across our schools.

PUBLIC

- There was also the implementation of a new school staff wellbeing model. This was really exciting work. A new school staff wellbeing response team has now been set up and has begun work - they began in May. Initially, they're supporting 13 schools that we know have complex settings, for all sorts of reasons. The team provides direct support to those school leaders during critical incidents, but also after critical incidents as well. This is all about freeing up, supporting and empowering our educators to focus on teaching and learning, and really being there in the moments that they need us, and having that follow-up as well.
- In August, a new staff wellbeing service, Wellbeing Connect, was launched. That was to provide universal access to wellbeing assistance from right across the department. This was really coming back in feedback to me as I was visiting schools that there were times when our leaders were feeling a bit alone, so we've really responded to that, and we're proud of that response team and the work that they are doing right across Tasmania. We also looked at improving alignment between our school education system and the University of Tasmania. That's been a great body of work.
- In May, the Advisory Council on Education provided advice on ways that we can really strengthen initial teacher education through the University of Tasmania. Are the teachers that we're putting into schools as new teachers, regardless of what age they might be:
 - Classroom-ready?
 - Do they feel confident?
 - Is their experience in week-one of teaching in a class what they were expecting? Is that what they've been set up for?

It's been wonderful to work with the university to have a good look at what is teaching today, what is teaching in 10 years, and are we actually setting up our teaching workforce and our educators for success. We're working now with the university to finalise an agreement to ensure that our graduate teachers really are classroom-ready.

Finally, we got straight into action around the recommendation from Vicki Baylis in the independent review to trial multi-school organisations, which I've already spoken a bit about. Our three schools will begin the formal trial at the beginning of next year. Our other schools are going into groupings in preparation for what will be in a multi-school organisation. It will be a five-year trial. We're really excited about what possible outcomes we can get there.

Scoping is already under way on the remaining recommendations. That's including family engagement, digital tools and system accountability. The implementation plan provides a clear pathway forward for improving outcomes for Tasmanian learners, which is first and foremost, and ensuring that the review's recommendations are delivered in a coordinated way, but also in really learner-focused ways.

'Education Together: Transforming learning through collaboration' will be our reform strategy over the next five years. That will be bringing together all the positive work that we're

PUBLIC

doing under the one banner, which is deeply based in the recommendations and the findings of that independent review into Education.

Mr SHELTON - That's really good. Before we move on to all the beginning teachers -

CHAIR - Sorry, we have to stop. We'll take a short break. Time taken for breaks must be made up. I encourage members to be as quick as they can, please.

The Committee suspended from 10.33 a.m. to 10.43 a.m.

CHAIR - Thank you. Before we go to Mr Willie, minister, you want to clarify one of your answers to a question.

Ms PALMER - I did. Thank you, Chair, I'd like to correct the record on an earlier comment. The implementation plan for the independent review of education recommendations outlines what we are delivering, who we are partnering with and timeframes for delivery, which will be reported on annually. Consultation has already occurred around those recommendations. Thank you, Chair.

Mr WILLIE - I offer the minister another opportunity to correct something she said earlier. You keep saying that the Multi-School Organisation trial was a recommendation of that inquiry when it was a finding.

Ms PALMER - Okay, thank you. I'm happy to take that on board.

Mr WILLIE - I'd suggest to you, and I know from my time during the system that your staff will get their backs up when an education minister goes overseas and hand picks an idea and comes back and says this is what we're doing. I'd suggest to you that there's quite a lot of your staff that are unhappy in schools and within the department because you did have another trial in Communities of Schools and you have a lot of work to do to sell this trial to them because there's a lot of scepticism. There are mixed reports about its impact overseas.

CHAIR - Mr Willie, there's no question in there.

Mr WILLIE - I'm interested in the McKinnon seed funding for the trial. How much is going into the trial?

Ms PALMER - There's a number of points to that question. I will start by saying we were invited by the Susan McKinnon Foundation to join the researchers from the Grattan Institute to have the opportunity to look at an education system that was delivering real outcomes for students in another country, in the UK. We went, we took a team, myself and my chief of staff, and we also had two of our deputy secretaries. We were on a tour that included members from the Victorian government as well, both members of parliament and members of other, the head of the Catholic education system. What we saw was so extraordinary. We saw schools that had been turned around, we saw teachers that were in love with teaching, and we saw children that were thriving in this environment.

Mr WILLIE - Do you accept that it hasn't worked over there as well in some schools?

PUBLIC

Ms PALMER - One of the things that's fortunate for us is that the people were engaging with were incredibly honest. They spoke to us about where they believe when they rolled out that reform that it didn't work, it didn't hit the mark. They were keen to say, this is what we would have done differently. We had the benefit of 20 years of what they rolled out. We have the benefit of all their experiences. We had the opportunity to take on board the very best and the things that absolutely worked.

If I was sitting here and if I was presenting data to you that saw extraordinary outcomes for every single child in Tasmania, regardless of what school they're in, regardless of their circumstances, then criticism for wanting to reform an education system would be warranted.

Mr WILLIE - The minister has misrepresented what I've said. Of course, we want to reform the system and have improvement in outcomes. It's how you go about it. That's the premise of the question.

Ms PALMER - Chair, I would like the opportunity to answer.

Mr WILLIE - Well, don't misrepresent me, please.

CHAIR - The minister has the call.

Ms PALMER - I am certainly not misrepresenting you. I am saying to you that if I had a completely different data set of outcomes, then looking at an education system review would not be warranted, but that's not what we have. That isn't and I've finished speaking to Mr Razay about that. We've taken the very best of what we're able to learn in the UK and we've bought it here to Tasmania. How do we communicate what we saw? How do we get this information into schools and get that feedback? There are a number of things that we did around that. One in particular was setting up a steering committee. Now on that steering committee we had Jane Bovill, an extraordinary and experienced principal. We had someone with extraordinary strength in governance. We pulled together kind of a bit of an ace team to look at, would this benefit Tasmania if it did, how do we roll it out? How do we make it work?

We had quite a clear communications plan of how we wanted this to roll out. Unfortunately there was an election. I made the decision that I didn't want this to become a political hot potato in the election. So we put had to sort of pull back on our comms and pull back on the work that we were doing. Then, once the election came and went, we were back in and communicating. One of the first things that the secretary and I did was we went straight to principal forums. We said, 'We're sorry there was an election. It has dented how we thought this was going to roll out. Now we're playing catch up.' And we're, certainly doing that. I think the voice of our principals in this space is it just can't be refuted. The opportunity that they see just in their three schools alone and what's already happening organically before the official trials even started, I think absolutely shows that we are on the right track now.

I completely accept that not everybody is on board, not everybody likes change. I understand that and I am prepared to cop that because I've seen something extraordinary. It is based in research. I saw these great outcomes.

One of the other things that I did when I got back from the UK is, I went to Mr Bayley, who was the spokesperson for the Greens. I went to Sarah Lovell, who at that point was the shadow education minister in this space. Because I don't want this to be political; I don't want

PUBLIC

ownership of it. I want this to be us as a state going, 'We want better outcomes for our kids. We want better wellbeing outcomes for our teachers. What can we do? We've seen something extraordinary. Let's all work together.' I accept not everybody is on board, but we are working through that; we do want to take everybody on the journey.

I'm sure that you would be hearing criticisms, I hear those criticisms as well, but I also get messages from principals asking where's the next Multi-School Organisation (MSO)? Can it be my school? How do I participate in this? I've read the research; how can I be part of it? I'm prepared to cop that criticism. I want everybody to come on the journey. But I acknowledge reform change is difficult. We did have the interruption of the election, but we are certainly back on track. We have numerous drop-in information sessions that are being held regularly. We have a great team working on this.

We are rolling this out slowly. It's a five-year trial to ensure that we are evaluating. We've already started evaluating now, but to be sure that we have that evaluation in place. So that we can move faster, if it's having great outcomes and we can push harder we will. If we feel we need to pull back, we will be able to do that, but we want to see great success here. We want to see a change here for our student outcomes.

Mr WILLIE - My specific question, Chair, was the McKinnon seed funding into those schools?

Ms PALMER - Yes. I will head to the secretary, but I think it's in the budget papers. It's \$600,000 of seed funding from us to go into the school, but I will refer to the secretary.

Ms WEBSTER - The minister is correct. There's \$600,000 of seed funding from the department which is in the budget papers. The McKinnon -

Mr WILLIE - Nothing from McKinnon?

Ms WEBSTER - I'm just going to that, Mr Willie, sorry. McKinnon have funded the UK study tour, the two study tours that the minister mentioned. They have contributed to Teach Well professional development, and they have contributed to the work towards recruitment for a CEO and a head of operations, not the salary, but their recruitment search for those. No funding from McKinnon has directly gone into school budgets.

Mr WILLIE - Right. Given it's a trial, if you roll it out further, will other schools have the access to the same resources from the government and McKinnon? Same quantum of funding, same support from McKinnon?

Ms PALMER - I think this is part of our valuation and rolling this out. It's been fantastic to work with the McKinnon Foundation and the Grattan Institute, and that is part of beginning the evaluation immediately to make sure that we are able to evaluate what we need to do along the way. Is there anything you'd like to add to that, secretary?

Ms WEBSTER - Through you, minister. That work is currently being undertaken. We have a memorandum of understanding with McKinnon. They want to see this trial succeed as well, but they completely understand that this is a Tasmanian trial, and the Grattan Institute as well understand that. We are not simply picking up the UK model and putting it in Tasmania. We are working on an evaluation framework. We've asked our principals advisory group.

PUBLIC

We've asked our union to contribute to what that framework would look like. What would they expect to see in an evaluation over the five years, and we are taking it very slowly to make sure that we don't make the mistakes that the UK made and that we get better outcomes for learners.

The minister is correct. This is an exciting piece of reform, but we need to make sure that we take it slowly and we Tasmanian-ise that reform and that's what we're doing.

Mr WILLIE - My question wasn't answered, Chair, which was, will schools, if it's rolled out further, have the same access to the same quantum of funding and the same support from McKinnon?

Ms PALMER - I have already answered that question.

CHAIR - Mr Willie, the minister did answer that in regard to it's part of the early period of the trial.

Mr WILLIE - It's not a fair trial if they don't get the same access.

Mr BAYLEY - Minister, I want to put on the record that we think it's very welcome the action you're taking today in relation to schools and the coloured sand issue that closing schools, getting experts engaged, standing up the emergency operations group is very welcome and appropriate irrespective of the advice around the low risk.

With respect, I want to note that Friday's action was lacklustre and incomplete. I now have the ACCC's actual recall notice from the day before your staff sent that e-mail, 13 November, under what consumers should do. It is virtually word for word for what you have advised, or your department has advised, principals about what you should do if you have these products. It's virtually word for word except that for point 2 where your advice was to place the sand in a heavy duty plastic bag and double tape it securely and keep it out of reach of children.

The 13 November advice from the ACCC, No 2 was wear disposable gloves and a mask and place the sand in a heavy duty plastic bag and double tape it securely to keep it out of reach of children. So what was missing from your advice? Your advice that the ACCC had was wear disposable gloves and a mask.

I want to ask whether there was a deliberate decision not to include this advice in the notification to principals, noting your belief and your advice that this was low risk. Obviously, the notion of staff wearing PPE, would increase the alarm levels. I acknowledge that.

I want to ask whether given the advice that you've put out is virtually word for word to the ACCCs, aside from the PPE element, was there a deliberate decision not to include that so as to, I guess, minimise levels of alarm within the school communities?

Ms PALMER - I'm going to have to ask for clarification of what you're reading from because I've got the Product Safety recall which point 2 is - I think what we've been looking at is different. I might have to pass to the secretary.

Mr BAYLEY - Just for clarity, I'm looking at an ACCC recall notice published on 13 November that's talking about Kadink decorative sand 10 gram 6 pack.

PUBLIC

Ms WEBSTER - Through you, minister. There were two recall advertisements. One was for that particular sand product, and the other one was for the other educational colours, rainbow sand and a couple of others and a smaller amount of the Kidink sand. They have two different pieces of advice around wearing disposable gloves. One says quite clearly what consumers should do and it doesn't talk about PPE, and the other one does. I can't explain why we've lifted one and not the other, but I think that is what has simply happened, Mr Bayley. Those two product recalls were both attached to that email.

Mr BAYLEY - Right, but would you not have seen - if they were both attached, wouldn't the precautionary principle apply and you would lean in with the heaviest and most precautionary advice possible to your staff, given the duty of care and given the significance of asbestos-related issues, and I guess the common knowledge, really, to be honest, that we do need to protect ourselves, particularly with a mask if we're dealing with these kind of products?

Ms WEBSTER - I can't answer why that happened, Mr Bayley.

Mr BAYLEY - Minister, do you acknowledge that it would be a mistake to have sent out that kind of advice to staff, instructing them to deal with an asbestos product - which is a dangerous product, irrespective of the low-risk advice - without advising them to wear PPE?

Ms PALMER - We certainly sent out the information in the email that reiterated exactly the steps that the ACCC recommended with regard to the education rainbow sand. We attached both of the recall advice notifications to that email. In hindsight, yes, I would have preferred that stronger language that referred to wearing gloves and a mask, but we certainly -

Mr BAYLEY - So, it was a mistake not to acknowledge that in the email?

CHAIR - Mr Bayley, let the minister finish please.

Ms PALMER - I'll refer to the secretary.

Ms WEBSTER - Mr Bayley, I think that's correct. It's a mistake, and we would absolutely - looking at that in hindsight, that is my responsibility as secretary of the department. That information came out from the department. We were working on advice that we had at the time. We were trying to push the information out, no doubt quickly, to staff - but absolutely take on board what you're saying.

Mr BAYLEY - Has there been subsequent emails to principals?

CHAIR - Sorry, Mr Bayley, you've had your questions. Next round, please.

Mr GARLAND - Minister, staying on the North West Support School, the construction costs have increased significantly since the school upgrade was announced in 2021. The \$8 million allocation for the Burnie campus is no longer adequate to deliver the promised school upgrade.

Will you commit to revising the capital allocation to meet the documented needs of the Burnie campus, estimated at closer to \$20 million, for safe classrooms, therapy areas, OHS-compliant spaces, storage, and enrolment growth? Can you commit that any hydrotherapy pool, if co-located, will be funded entirely separately from the school's upgrade budget, and

PUBLIC

that every dollar allocated for school infrastructure will remain exclusively for school infrastructure?

Ms PALMER - I'm going to seek some advice, because there's quite a number of questions within your question. I have some information here, which I will share with you.

What I will say is I never commit to anything in this environment. I'll always take on board suggestions, but I'll always go back and carefully look at and think about things. I think just for me, as a minister, that's where I feel comfortable to make sure I have all the information. Certainly in no way is that saying that I'm disregarding any of those concerns in any way, shape or form. I certainly take on board the comments that you're making.

I will tell you this commitment is a game-changer for the community to deliver a new purpose-built campus that will replace the current Devonport campus, and of course, upgrades at the existing Burnie campus to provide capacity for growing enrolments.

The new hydrotherapy pools at both campuses are also key deliverables under this commitment, and as part of our 2025 election policies we've committed to making the new hydrotherapy pools available for community use outside of school hours. This is a \$62.15 million funding commitment for the North West Support School, and it's the largest ever investment that we've seen in upgrades in an existing government school. We know that these new upgraded facilities are much needed for our learners and for our families in the north-west. We know the great advantage that can come from this.

In the 2024-25 state budget, the funding for the North West Support School was increased by \$45 million, taking the total funding available for both projects to that \$62.15 million. Separate project working groups have been established, with different architectural firms appointed, as they are quite distinctly different projects, certainly in scale and also in the scope of those projects as well. Those project working groups are now developing the concept plans and the proposed scope of works in close consultation with the school and also with the school association representatives. It's expected that the concept plan for the proposed works to the Burnie campus and the new campus at Spreyton will be shared with the school and the broader community for feedback in the first half of 2026. We look forward to further engagement around that.

Mr GARLAND - Thank you, minister. Just one question - I have to leave now - will you commit to visiting the North West Support School in person, so that families and the school association can speak with you directly? That's a commitment.

Ms PALMER - You're determined to get me to commit to something.

Mr GARLAND - Yes, I am.

Ms PALMER - Let me tell you, I have already visited and I would love to go back and visit them again, and you're most welcome to join me.

Mr GARLAND - Good job. Thank you.

Mr SHELTON - Thank you, Chair. Minister, media coverage of safety in our early childhood and care sectors over recent times - nationally, more than anything - has

understandably left families seeking reassurance that their children are safely cared for in that environment. What's the Tasmanian government doing to ensure our children are safe, particularly in the early childhood sector?

Ms PALMER - Thank you very much for this question. I don't think there's anything more important than the safety of our children and our young people. I would like to acknowledge that really distressing news that came out around those really serious incidents that we did see nationally - particularly in Victoria, and the impact that that had on those families, but I think the impact it had on families right across the country who had such a sense of uneasiness.

I also want to acknowledge our extraordinary staff who work in our ECEC sector; they too were left very distressed by the incidents that happened. We have some amazing people working in that space. I was able to have conversations with some of them and I know that they felt deeply impacted by it. The recent *Four Corners* report and local reporting by ABC online has been distressing. As I said, keeping our children safe is absolutely our priority.

One incident is one too many, and I do want to ensure Tasmanian families that we have a number of safeguarding measures in place to protect our children in our early childhood education and care settings. Some of those measures include the requirement for all educators to hold a current Working with Vulnerable People registration card, and the strong regulatory role fulfilled by the department's Education and Care Unit, known as the ECU. The ECU operates under a model of proactive regulation and this includes the assessment and rating of services against the legislative requirements, as well as the use of unannounced monitoring visits to services, which gives them the opportunity to be observing them in their day-to-day practice.

There's also the implementation of the Tasmanian Child and Youth Safe Organisations Framework. However, I recognise that further action needs to be undertaken to strengthen child safety measures. On 22 August this year, I met with education ministers from right across states and territories, and also with the Commonwealth minister to discuss urgent and necessary action to be taken to ensure safety of our children attending early childhood education and care services. That was a meeting that was attended by the secretary and me in person. Our ministers were absolutely united in our agreement on the following actions for the sector.

Mandatory child safety training that will be introduced for all ECEC staff, for volunteers and students, with training available nationally from 2026. Wage costs will be supported by targeted Commonwealth subsidies.

We're also going to see a national educator register. This is important because the establishment of this will actually give regulators visibility of who is working where and when. That's one of the most important things that we are seeing out of some of the actions that are coming out of this.

Also national CCTV assessment is going to commence. There's going to be 300 services nationally who are going to build an evidence base for safe and ethical use of surveillance of ECEC settings. That's part of an initial assessment. Who's going to be part of that initial assessment is work that's still under way.

PUBLIC

Of course, we're seeing no mobile phones and devices capable of capturing images. They've now been banned and certainly restricted during direct work with children. Unannounced spot checks - they are going to be expanded with joint compliance visits between Commonwealth and state and territory regulators are commencing from November this year.

Our families will have greater access to compliance information via startingblocks.gov.au and services will also be required to actually physically display breaches and conditions.

Penalties under the national law will be tripled, which, the intent is to strengthen deterrence and accountability. The safety, rights and best interests of children will be the paramount consideration under the national law, reinforcing child-centred decision making.

The limitation period for prosecuting offences under the national law will be extended, enabling regulators to pursue enforcement actions where serious non-compliance is identified beyond current timeframes.

We also see work under way across jurisdictions to identify and to share current approaches to the frequency of regular visitors. Additionally, work is progressing to provide advice on fee increases under the national law. That includes options for differentiation by provider size and type and how additional funds can be used to supply regulatory activity.

Our government is continuing to work really closely with other states and territories, and with our Commonwealth counterparts to ensure that we are making available every lever that we can to keep our children safe. We will continue to closely monitor implementation of the agreed actions. We're wholeheartedly committed to working hand in hand with the sector to deliver the necessary actions. Thank you very much for a very important question.

Mr WILLIE - Minister, school staff are reporting escalating violence in schools and incidents. I accept that all the society walks through the school gate every day and it's hard to prevent everything. I will give you an opportunity to talk about what the department's doing to support staff and students, but I've also got a series of questions around data I know the department collects. I'm happy for you to take that on notice. If I could reel off these? Or you could answer them now?

Ms PALMER - Yes. We've tried very hard to make sure we have the information. We will take on notice what we can't, but we've worked quite hard to bring it the table.

Mr WILLIE - The figures held by the department relating to the level of bullying in Tasmanian schools for 2024, 2023 and 2022, the last three years.

The number of student-on-student assaults or other incidents of physical violence that occurred in Tasmanian schools in 2024, 2023 and 2022.

The number of student-on-teacher assaults or other incidents of physical violence that occurred in Tasmanian schools in 2024, 2023 and 2022.

I'm saying 2024 because I know that's the census date for March and you don't have the 2025 data yet.

PUBLIC

The number of suspensions for bullying, harassment, stalking of another student in 2024, 2023 and 2022.

The number of suspensions for bullying, harassment, stalking of a teacher or other staff member in 2024, 2023 and 2022.

The total number of student suspensions in 2024, 2023 and 2022, including a breakdown by grade.

Ms PALMER - Okay, we're going to make a start because I think we have some of that information here and you might need to remind us as we work through. Do you have the list there?

Mr WILLIE - It's an old list. It doesn't have the right dates on it.

Ms PALMER - That's okay, we'll adjust the dates. Thank you for the question. I know that this is a huge issue in our schools and there's no place for violence anywhere in our communities. We want our children to be going to school and feeling safe and we want our teachers and our school staff to be going to school and feeling safe. This is a key focus of our government. As you acknowledge, violent behaviour is a community wide problem, and it does require a whole-of-community response.

Schools work hard, as you well know, to understand these behaviours and to develop and use appropriate supports and responses to them. We have a clear focus on de-escalation and prevention. We know we have to respond, and we have to have levers in place when there is violence, but we don't want the violence in the beginning, so that de-escalation of potential moments when violence can occur and work in that preventative space. As you say, there's a range of external factors and they all come into the school gate and, they don't get left behind and it's our teachers who are absorbing that. We are very much aware of that.

Schools have access to a range of resources and supports to ensure all efforts are made to implement proactive strategies to reduce unsafe behaviour and to minimise suspensions and, as I said, the safety of our students and our teachers is always going to be paramount. Looking at some of the range of responses and strategies that are in place, it's to develop an understanding of why a student has behaved in a particular way; to resolve or address issues, including providing extra support to students where it's appropriate; to consider the impact on student learning of any response to the behaviour; and to ensure that the school environment is safe and it supports learning and attainment.

It would be good to hand over to the secretary to work through some of those datasets.

Ms WEBSTER - Thank you, minister, and through you. Mr Willie, we can't break the incidents of violence reported by schools down through our safety reporting system, but I can give you an overall figure then talk about what that includes. In 2022, there were 462 reports of violence, and that includes incidents of physical violence at schools per calendar year, including student to student, student to staff incidents; reports of assaults with an object or a weapon to deliberate kicks, punches, bites, spitting, pushes, grabs; and any other more serious issues as well. So, in 2022 there were 462 reported incidents, in 2023 there were 696, and in 2024 there were 1363. That is a significant increase, but we have been actively promoting and recording the data because of our safety reporting system because we want to understand the

PUBLIC

issues and then allow us to focus on the particular areas. That has contributed to some of the higher reporting that we've seen.

Mr WILLIE - It demonstrates that the school staff are not making it up either. They're struggling with this.

Ms PALMER - I don't think there's any issue around anyone making anything up. When I go to schools and I talk to teachers, I know that this is a problem that they're facing, and when I talk to families, they're talking about it as well. We're very aware that this is an issue.

Ms WEBSTER - In terms of that, through you, minister, there are a couple of other things that I wanted to mention. We have a number of organisations that deliver training in our schools, as you would be aware, on some of these key issues, including Working It Out, and A Fairer World, I think also deliver - we have a particular focus on anti-racism and I chair that steering committee myself and that includes members of the community, members of the school system, and also child safety and youth justice.

Mr WILLIE - Do you focus on particular schools and might be having a challenge in terms of some of those -

Ms WEBSTER - Sometimes we focus, sorry, through you minister, but, generally, it's about what we can do as a system and using examples of good practice then using examples of where we can perhaps improve our practice. There is a lot of work happening within schools on that at the moment, but we have had conversations with the community and I've had a number of one-on-one conversations with the community about what we need to do. It is a community problem, but as you said, the community walks through the door of the school and we want to make sure that everyone has a really positive experience - our staff, but also our students.

I think - through you, minister - suspension data, Mr Willie, and it was 2023-24, is that correct?

Mr WILLIE - Yes, please.

Ms WEBSTER - So, kinder to year 6, 2022 - proportion of students suspended in 2022, 2.6 per cent for kinder to -

Mr WILLIE - I mean the total number.

Ms WEBSTER - Sorry. I can tell you in 2024 there were 10,330 suspensions or suspension incidents. That was a decrease of 9 per cent or 1020 incidents, from the highest ever reported number in 2023. I probably should have looked at the next table because that actually tells me the number. So, kinder to year 6: in 2022 had 2119 suspensions, 2023 had 2955 suspensions, and 2024 had 2681 suspensions. Years 7 to 12: 2022 had 6562 suspensions, 2023 had 8115 suspensions, and 2024 had 7285. Years 11 and 12: 2022 had 192 suspensions, 2023 had 280 suspensions, and 2024 had 364.

The totals, then, are 8873 for 2022; 11,350 for 2023; 10,330 for 2024. Did you ask for reasons?

PUBLIC

Mr WILLIE - Yes.

Ms WEBSTER - We can't break that down, minister, but we can break down the top 10 suspension reasons.

Mr WILLIE - Yes.

Ms WEBSTER - So -

- Physical abuse of another student
 - 2022, 23.6 per cent
 - 2023, 23.3 per cent
 - 2024, 24.2 per cent
- Defiance or disobedience
 - 2022, 11.3 per cent
 - 2023, 13.4 per cent
 - 2024, 14.2 per cent
- Other offensive verbal behaviour
 - 2022, 10 per cent
 - 2023, 8.1 per cent
 - 2024, 9.3 per cent
- Aggressive or threatening behaviour
 - 2022, 7.5 per cent
 - 2023, 7.8 per cent
 - 2024, 7.8 per cent
- Rudeness or insolence
 - 2022, 4.9 per cent
 - 2023, 4.6 per cent
 - 2024, 5.3 per cent
- Other inappropriate or unacceptable behaviour
 - 2022, 5.4 per cent
 - 2023, 6.2 per cent
 - 2024, 5.2 per cent

There are more categories.

Mr WILLIE - I'm happy for you to table it, through the minister, sorry.

Ms PALMER - Excuse me, Chair, can we have a point of clarification?

Ms WEBSTER - So, Mr Willie, the numbers that I gave you for discipline were number of disciplinary sanctions, not number of students.

Mr WILLIE - Yes.

Ms WEBSTER - I just wanted to clarify. Could have been the same student -

Mr WILLIE - Repeatedly, yes. Can we have some data just for the 2024 year in the number of students with a disability who require an educational adjustment who were

PUBLIC

suspended and also, for students in out-of-home care, Tasmanian Aboriginal students and suspensions that involve weapons or dangerous objects?

Ms PALMER - Chair, so that we can keep proceedings rolling, we will have someone work on that information and we will get it to you before - No, there you go.

Ms WEBSTER - This is number of sanctions again, Mr Willie, not students. You wanted disability?

Mr WILLIE - Yes, just the 2024 year.

Ms WEBSTER - Disability?

Mr WILLIE - Yes please.

Ms WEBSTER - It is 4261, number of sanctions. Did you want out-of-home care?

Mr WILLIE - Yes.

Ms WEBSTER - It is 385, and First Nations 2682.

Mr WILLIE - Then the number of suspensions involving weapons or dangerous objects.

Ms WEBSTER - I'm not sure that we can provide. We will have to take that for a minute.

Mr WILLIE - You will take it on notice? You have provided it in the past.

Ms PALMER - We will try to get it to you before the end of the session, but if not, we will provide that and I will take that on notice.

Mr BAYLEY - Minister, most people broadly understand that the Budget has been reverse-engineered to achieve a surplus at the end of the forward Estimates, modest as it is at \$5 million, but it's been reversed engineered. There are a lot of line items which don't have funding in the forward Estimates. A couple of them are the school lunches program and 26Ten, raising literacy for adults and numeracy for adults. Why is it that there is no funding in the forward Estimates for these programs? Is it your expectation that they continue? If not, why are they being cut?

Ms PALMER - There's different reasons. I think you mentioned 26Ten? Fantastic organisation and they were funded for a program and I believe that funding ends at June 2026. That was for a specific program, but what we're doing at the moment is through Libraries Tasmania, we are doing a body of work about the next adult literacy strategy. That's looking at what are the programs that we have in this space, what are the outcomes, what's working, where should we be investing and that strategy is being developed now. Once we get that strategy, that will guide us in what are the best ways for us to see outcomes across adult literacy. That's just one example of why you would see that there isn't a continuation of a program that was meant to finish at 2026 anyway.

Mr BAYLEY - It sounds like there would be a commitment to ongoing adult literacy programs of some description?

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Ms PALMER - Yes, absolutely.

Mr BAYLEY - Is that captured in the budget in the forward Estimates anywhere?

Ms PALMER - That would be funding that would have been in a previous budget that's now being used to develop the adult strategy.

Mr BAYLEY - The strategy but not the program in the forward years?

Ms PALMER - The strategy.

Mr BAYLEY - But not the program?

Ms PALMER - The strategy. Because part of the work that needs to be done is looking at what we have been doing, what's working really well, what could we tweak or invest more that will get better outcomes, or what are some of the areas where perhaps we haven't seen those outcomes. I think that's just a good operation and a good way to make sure you don't just keep doing what you've always done.

Mr BAYLEY - I appreciate the review, but there's an intention to maintain a program of some description?

Ms PALMER - Yes, we are putting together now what is our strategy for adult literacy.

Mr BAYLEY - And the school lunches?

Ms PALMER - That has been funded through to the end of the school year for 2026. It's always hard with school things because we work on a calendar year, not a financial. That's now got funding through to the end of 2026. I just want to seek some advice.

So to get specific about the school lunch program. Because that has grown, which is fantastic in the way that it has grown, it is now going to be delivered to 60 school. The cost of that is beyond a grant that can be given. So we actually have to go out to tender for that program and that's because the funding's up around \$14 million for that. That's too big for there just to be a grant, which is what we were able to do in the beginning with school lunches.

Mr BAYLEY - But is there money in the Budget to continue that program?

Ms PALMER - There is money in the Budget to ensure that the program we have right now runs through to the end of 2026. The work needs to be done to go out to tender and then we will progress from there. I think our government has an excellent track record of our belief in the benefits of healthy school lunches. We also know that perhaps more and more in the community we are seeing food insecurity in communities where we haven't seen before. We know that not only is it fantastic for ensuring that children have food to eat in those 60 schools that are part of the current program, but also, we hear anecdotally the difference it makes for how children are settled in school, and we've seen that with the breakfast program.

Prof RAZAY - One issue that I really feel sad and disappointed about is the high drop-out rate of students after year 10. A 2024 Productivity Commission report showed that Tasmania again has one of the lowest year 12 attainment rates in Australia. Only 53 per cent

of students completed year 12. That's compared to a 76 per cent national average. It's really sad to see the high dropout.

When we look at the shortages of skilled workers we need to understand why. Of course there is, we call it a 'cultural thing', or people don't feel there is a value in higher learning and education. But I feel sometimes if they know that there is a cost going to university or TAFE, we need to do something more to save our young generation. They are the future of our country, the future of our economy. What initiative do we do to try to motivate them and inspire them? Just carrying on to year 12 is essential.

Ms PALMER - One of the recommendations that came out of the independent review is: what does success look like for our young people in Tasmania? There are varying opinions around that. Some believe that success is successfully completing year 12. Some people see someone leaving school in year 11 or in year 10 and going on to have an apprenticeship as a hairdresser, an electrician, that is great success as well. I think we do need to be careful around our language that the only way we view educational success is the completion of year 11 and year 12, or specifically year 12.

It's really important that as a state we acknowledge that not every young person flourishes in that structured teaching environment. Some of them flourish extraordinarily in other environments that sit outside years 11 and 12. What I want to see is that we acknowledge that there is a number of different pathways which as a state we should be so proud of our young people for taking. I know I certainly am.

I will share with you very briefly a story of a young lady who was doing some work in the Legislative Council on a day that some data came out and it was splashed all across the paper, what the percentage was of children who'd finished year 12. I'm not sure that you might have even been -

Mr WILLIE - She was doing work experience in my office and then we helped to get the traineeship.

Ms PALMER - Extraordinary young woman, an amazing young woman. Part of the conversation and the debate in the Chamber was around this data that came out and splashed across media outlets was, you know, fail, fail, fail, fail. She came up to me after and she said, 'I'm one of the failures'. I said 'No, you're not. You are anything but a failure. You're extraordinary.' Here she was as a 17-year old working in the Legislative Council directly with members of the Chamber. We loved her and she was brilliant. My heart broke when she stood there and she'd seen all this media saying because you don't fit in this box here, we're going to call you a failure. Well, we don't.

I want children to be able to choose if they want to go to years 11 and 12 and that's their success path; I want to make sure that we have brilliant 11s and 12s and that they can go in that direction. And if there's another direction that does see extraordinary success for them, I want them to know we're proud of them and we celebrate what they are doing.

One of the recommendations out of the independent review was around what does educational success look like. What is that? That's a big body of work that we are now undertaking working with the Catholic sector, working with the independent sector, working with our department and working with our community to say what does success look like,

because we want our young people to know whatever environment they're learning in, we're so proud of them that that they are learning.

That is not in any way taking away from the value of going to year 11 and 12. It's not in any way taking away the value of doing an apprenticeship. I see that they work hand in hand and we're really proud of the young people and I acknowledge that our year 11 and 12 students have had a big couple of weeks with their exams.

Mr WILLIE - The person you are talking about is a great ambassador for big picture schools because that was her pathway.

Ms PALMER - It was her pathway, and she's impacted our lives.

Prof RAZAY - I take your point, but I feel for the future there is an increased demand actually for skilled workers, even in digital technology and I believe by encouraging them even to year 11 and 12, even if they do traineeship, I believe that's quite essential because the market is going to be so competitive and we have to measure them with the standard they have.

Mr SHELTON - To add to the conversation. My sister, brother and I all started jobs out of out of high school and all went on to further education, two teachers and an engineer. Leaving school, kids don't always make the decision that we would like them to make.

My question, minister, is about teachers and I'm interested in the Highly Accomplished and Lead Teacher Certification initiative, and how much that's been taken up.

Ms PALMER - Highly accomplished or lead teachers, which is the HALT certification, recognises and celebrates teachers who continually reflect and improve their practice. TAS is strongly committed to this work and to growing the number of HALT accredited teachers who are everyday lifting outcomes for our learners right across the state.

As at the 30 June 2025, Tasmania has 13 certified HALT teachers and we have 10 teachers who are undertaking the program. I've been so blessed to have the opportunity to meet with them and spend time with them both in the classroom but also the opportunity to recognise them when they get this qualification.

The number and diversity of our HALTs is certainly growing. Of note, three current HALTs, one from each sector, are providing their expertise to the UTAS Master of Teaching Course Development Working Groupwork. That's the group that's supporting UTAS in its development of a new Master of Teaching program.

The TRB continues to work closely with certified HALTs and cross-sector educational representatives to further refine and to strengthen the program so that it really is reflecting the needs of Tasmanian teachers and schools.

Our HALT teachers are playing an influential role. They are providing targeted practice-informed advice to help redesign the program so that the new model is practical, it's authentic and it's certainly aligned with classroom realities.

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The revised program aims to streamline certification to reduce workload to better reflect Tasmania's educational context and directly address the National Teacher Workforce Action Plan recommendations.

Emphasis is also being shifted from remuneration as a driver for certification to high quality professional learning that strengthens teachers instructional and pedagogical leadership within their current roles. This approach not only enhances teacher quality across the state, but it also builds a strong future pipeline of Tasmania's educational leaders.

The stakeholder feedback that we've gathered so far is certainly showing there's really strong support for the new program, particularly from Catholic Education Tasmania, Independent Schools Tasmania, and the Tasmanian Principals Association.

TRB has worked closely with stakeholders this year to design the HALT program that will strengthen teacher quality, it will grow that leadership capacity and it will drive improvement across student outcomes. As a result, we're seeing an increased interest in that HALT certification, which is absolutely brilliant for our workforce. It's really exciting. Thank you for the question.

CHAIR - Mr Willie, we've got about two minutes.

Mr WILLIE - I'm happy for these to go on notice, if it's all right.

Minister, can you provide:

- The total amount your agency has been asked to save during this financial year under the Tasmanian Government's efficiency dividend policy?
- A summary of the measures being taken to produce these savings, including the value of each measure and the total number of job requests rejected through Tasmanian Government's vacancy control and hiring freeze policies in the current financial year to date, including the job titles, please?

Ms PALMER - Mr Willie, I won't be taking questions on notice, but we'll do everything we can to get you that information in the allotted time. What I can tell you is we have been able to get you the information for the firearm incidents, and we'll try to get that other information now.

Ms WEBSTER - Through you, minister. The possession of a firearm in 2024 was zero. Possession of explosives, including fireworks, was three, in 2024. Detonation of explosives, including fireworks, was 11. So obviously, you'd choose one category or the other. Possession of a dangerous knife, 33 in 2024. Possession of other dangerous weapons or objects, 25. The total 72.

CHAIR - The time for scrutiny has expired.

The next portfolio to appear before the committee is the Minister for Disability Services. Thank you, members. Thank you, minister.

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The Committee suspended from 11.40 a.m. to 11.46 a.m.

DIVISION 11

Department of Premier and Cabinet.

CHAIR - The committee of the Disability Services portfolio will now begin. I welcome the minister and other witnesses to the committee. I invite the minister to introduce persons at the table, names and positions, please, for the benefit of *Hansard*.

Ms PALMER - Directly to my left we have Mellisa Gray, Deputy Secretary; then on Mellisa's left, we have Ingrid Ganley, Director of Disability and Reform.

Could I just take a moment to acknowledge that Ingrid is the recent recipient of the Public Service Medal for Service to the Disability Sector.

Members - Well done.

CHAIR - Thank you, minister. The time scheduled for the Estimates of the Minister for Disability Services is one hour. Would the minister like to make an opening statement?

Ms PALMER - Yes. Thank you very much, Chair, for the opportunity to make some opening remarks.

The 2024-25 year has been one of historic reform for people with disability in Tasmania and the Disability Services portfolio. I was incredibly proud to deliver the *Disability Rights, Inclusion and Safeguarding Act 2024* through the Tasmanian parliament.

It involved significant consultation within Tasmania, involving people with disability, carers, advocates, disability service providers, peaks and other stakeholders, about what needed to be changed and what would enhance and promote the human rights of people with disability.

I want to thank colleagues for their role in passing this legislation and the collaborative way that it progressed through the Tasmanian Parliament, and some of us are sitting here at this table today. It's rare in our lives that you do have the chance to be part of something that is life-changing reform. This act will set our state up to be a more inclusive state and to provide disability issues the primacy and importance that they have long deserved. Long after we're gone, the change to culture and community policy and practice as a result of this act will endure.

The legislation delivers a contemporary model of disability rights and inclusion, and it's grounded in a social model of disability. It establishes a disability inclusion consultation and planning framework which will ensure that Tasmanians with disability are treated fairly and included in everyday life, and above all else, that they are safe and that their human rights are upheld.

It provides a framework for regulation and authorisation of restrictive practices and for prohibiting practices from being used. Key to this legislation is the establishment of a Disability Commissioner and a senior practitioner. Ms Catherine Whittington commenced as our inaugural Disability Commissioner on 12 May this year.

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The Disability Services portfolio covers disability-related policy, including legislation, national and state-based disability strategies, the National Disability Insurance Scheme, and the Disability Royal Commission. Importantly, this year - based on comments at last year's budget Estimates seeking clarity on the NDIS contribution - we have looked at the disability output and split the reporting into two output groups. Output 1.7 is disability services that has been established, and this includes the newly formed Office of the Tasmanian Disability Commissioner, which will be listed under a separate output in future budgets. If you look at output 1.8, the National Disability Insurance Scheme has been established, so you can clearly see the differential lines in the Budget around what goes into the NDIS contribution and what sits outside of it.

As we look ahead for 2025-26, we will be developing the first Tasmanian Disability Inclusion Plan. This four-year whole-of-government plan will be underpinned by a broad and inclusive consultation with the Tasmanian community. Consultation is already underway on that. All Tasmanian Government-defined entities will then commence development of Disability Inclusion Action plans, again building on consultation with people with disabilities. These action plans must be prepared by the end of 2026.

In collaboration with the Australian Government, we will be funding an additional eight Changing Places facilities. These will bring the total number of Changing Places in Tasmania to 14. We will work with the Australian state and territory governments to jointly design a system of supports outside the NDIS known as foundational supports. Tasmanian government agencies are also working towards understanding the demand for, and the services required, to successfully deliver foundational supports for children with disabilities and their families in Tasmania.

The Tasmanian government remains committed to a disability service system that uses evidence-based, good-practice approaches to improve outcomes for people with disabilities.

With that, I look forward to questions. Thank you.

Ms HADDAD - I know this is a short output, minister, but I want to put on the public record also my congratulations to Ingrid Ganley for her very well-deserved recognition with the Public Service Medal after decades of dedication to this very important policy area.

My first question does go to foundational supports. I know it's a challenge, that there's been a lot of negotiation between federal and state governments. However, it does seem there isn't funding or at least adequate funding dedicated to a rollout for foundational supports in Tasmania, which places a real risk on people with disability. Can you tell us about what the timelines are in the funding allocated for foundational supports, and if that's still a way away, what contingency plans exist to support people who aren't eligible for the NDIS while those foundational supports are put in place?

Ms PALMER - Thank you very much for the question. I acknowledge there is a lot of anxiety in our community, not just in our community, across our workforce, who are working on these reforms.

We went into the work the federal government was doing on the NDIS, and we're very much aligned with knowing the NDIS does need reform. We have seen extraordinary corruption in this area. We must be ensuring this scheme is sustainable, because where it has

worked for people with disabilities in Tasmania it can be quite life-changing. We absolutely know that there needs to be reform.

We have struggled as a state to get information about foundational supports. We have advocated constantly for two-and-a-half years, certainly since I've been minister, to get more information. The best way I can explain the body of work we have been doing back here - to try and prepare for something we're not really sure what it is, we don't really know how it's going to be funded, we don't know what it's going to cost - is that we've had a reform team within the department really designing in the dark, for want of a better statement.

We have looked at what do we have right now, what do we have in what areas of health, what do we have in education, what do we have in the community sector that we can pull together when we do get that information from the federal government on what foundational supports will look like.

We know that a new element to this now, which has just been announced, is Thriving Kids. Again, that was not information that was shared with me or our department, as in the disability space. We learned the detail of that from minister Butler's press conference. But again, we are doing everything we can to try and be as ready as we can be for something we don't have a lot of detail about.

You will see in the budget money has been allocated for that reform work. That's across NDIS reform, foundational supports, outcomes of the Disability Royal Commission, and commission of inquiry. You will see that there is money allocated for us to try and do as much reform work as we can do without the information, we really need to roll it out.

Ms HADDAD - I understand that a lot of those timelines are outside of your control, and I understand the frustrations with the gaps in timeline between the old system and the new one under foundational supports. What comfort have you been given by the federal government about when we can expect to see that detail?

Also, in the meantime, what happens to people who aren't eligible for a NDIS package, who are potentially going to be put really at risk of missing out on the services they need in the meantime, at a state-based level?

Ms PALMER - One of the big concerns I have as a minister is we have some dates from the federal government about when this will roll out, but we don't necessarily have the pathway or the information about that. I might hand to my deputy secretary for some further comments.

Ms GRAY - I can confirm there are no changes to the NDIS until foundational supports is agreed. The agreement of foundational supports is subject to the successful conclusion of the National Health Reform Agreement and foundational supports negotiations that are under way at the moment.

We have committed as officials to design work. As the minister said, there is an allocation in the budget for disability reform. We've commissioned consultants, we've set up a foundational supports advisory group. We're doing everything we possibly can to be ready.

Ms HADDAD - Sorry, I don't want to cut you off. Is there a consumer input into that advisory group?

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Ms GRAY - There's disability sector service provider input, but we have a six-month window from the successful conclusion of the negotiations and that's where - we don't want to consult too early when we don't actually know what -

Ms HADDAD - Know what it is. Yes. That's fair enough.

Ms GRAY - We don't want to waste people's time and precious time of the disability service sector either.

Ms ROSOL - To turn to a different area now, which is the Australian Disability Strategy lists inclusive homes and communities as an outcome area, with a priority policy being that housing is accessible for people living with disability.

In September, just before the second phase of the livable housing design rules were due to take effect in Tasmania under the National Construction Code, the Housing Industry Association Tasmania, Master Builders Tasmanian and the Property Council of Australia, Tasmanian Division, came out demanding these livable or accessible housing standards be paused.

I note this morning that there's a media release from Mr Barnett, the Minister for Small Business, Trade and Consumer Affairs, saying that he is opening up consultation on a freeze of the National Construction Code in Tasmania. Again, the Master Builders Tasmania are saying they want to hit pause on the new residential codes and changes. These calls fly in the face of the Australian Disability Strategy and Tasmania's commitment to ensuring new housing is accessible.

What action will you take as the Minister for Disability Services in response to industry calls to to pause the code, effectively meaning that new housing doesn't have to be built to the liveable standards? What action will you take and how will you advocate in this area for people living with disability?

Ms PALMER - I was disappointed by the release that came out from the building and construction sector. The sector has now had ample time to prepare for implementation of the next stage of the livable housing design standards as set out in the National Construction Code. Taking on a phased implementation approach was already a delay in recognition of the fact that we were getting feedback from the sector that was saying they weren't ready by 1 October 2024. We're certainly taking on board what they say, there has already been that delay there.

The Attorney-General did state in parliament that our government remains steadfast in our support of Tasmanians with disability and our ageing population, elderly people as well. That is why we are implementing the provisions of the livable house around livable housing on the timeline and the staged implementation that was agreed to and set out last year. That was the step-free entrance including widening the door and the level entrance, step-free shower and reinforcement of bathroom and toilet walls from 1 October 2024.

Then for 1 October 2025, the above plus internal doors and corridors that facilitate comfortable and unimpeded movement between spaces. Toilet on the ground or entry level that provides easy access, except if you're not living on the ground floor, it might just be a garage.

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Then 1 October 2026 you add to that step-free path to a travel entrance. Again there were exemptions around the steepness of a block considering the Tasmanian impact.

I always have and I will continue to advocate to ensure that we are building homes that are up to that standard, and that someone with a disability can arrive in and know that they're living in a state where we are taking into account their needs. To be fair, at any point any one of us could need a livable home and that's how vulnerable life is.

Ms ROSOL - Thank you for that and for your commitment. Do you agree it's concerning that there seems to be another part of the government that is working against that with this consultation around pausing the National Code? How will you address that with the Minister for Consumer Affairs?

Ms PALMER - My understanding is that that's actually for the next stage and that's not current. Our current implementation isn't changing, but I have an excellent working relationship with the Attorney-General and we are often having discussions, whether it be around the Cabinet table or between minister and minister. To date he has been very supportive of people with disabilities. He has lived experience with his dad, who had motor neuron disease, so he understands this, he gets it, and I have no concerns that he would not be advocating strongly as I would be to ensure that we have good housing outcomes for people with disabilities and also our elderly.

Prof RAZAY - Thank you very much. Honourable minister, disabled people are experiencing abuse, including social, physical, sexual and financial. What budget measures, including legislative safeguards, are being implemented to support and protect people with a disability?

Ms PALMER - Thank you very much. I think much of the work that we've done with the new legislation that passed in parliament in 2024 was very much around how we create a better Tasmania for people with disabilities. Their voices were heard loud and clear in the development of that legislation. One of the great outcomes of that is the establishment of Tasmania's very first Disability Commissioner, Catherine Whittington. She commenced her role on 12 May. She brings such a wealth of knowledge to that position, including some experience as the Deputy Commissioner at the Office of the Health and Community Services Complaint Commission, and also as an advocate of the Office of the Guardian for Children and Young People in South Australia.

Importantly, she brings to this position lived experience as a person with disability. That was actually written into the legislation, that's for the voice of people with disability, for that commissioner position, it must be someone who has that lived experience. We want someone who we don't have to tell certain things because they already know, they already feel what we feel. She has hit the ground running and been quite exceptional.

There are other parts of that legislation that go towards restrictive practices. We have Marita O'Connell. With your indulgence, I could bring Marita to the table. Her role is as Senior Practitioner and she would be able to talk, with the new legislation, about what we have done to ensure work around restrictive practices and also keeping people with disabilities safe.

Ms O'CONNELL - Thank you, minister. I started in the role in April 2025 and the act went live on 1 July. The Office of the Senior Practitioner already existed under the previous

legislation, but it's been significantly elevated with the introduction of the new act. My office now is the single point of authorisation for disability services providers to use restrictive practices, so that's taken the office from an advisory office to that of a regulator. The other big change that we've seen is that restrictive practices, which under the old act were defined differently from the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) Commission and we've now aligned those definitions and introduced chemical restraint as a regulated restrictive practice for the first time in Tasmania.

We've seen about a three-fold increase in applications to use restrictive practices, which on the face of it may seem alarming, but we are very encouraged by that for a couple of reasons. One is that it means the sector is responding to the introduction of chemical restraint, and we think too that the significant engagement activities that we did around the commencement of the act have raised awareness of all restrictive practices and that's resulted in more applications. Whilst it looks like an upward trend, we really think that it's just bringing some practices that were perhaps not being reported and occurring in the dark out into the light.

One of the defining features of the Tasmanian Senior Practitioners Office is that that all authorisation happens from within the government and not within providers. I have allied health staff across the state and for every application, my staff do a site visit unless there's a reason not to. The person with disability may choose not to be visited for example, but that would be unusual. My staff going to the sites, very often people's houses, and speaking to the person about restrictive practices as well as doing an assessment and the scan of anything else that might be happening in the house and bringing to my attention any kinds of concerns that they might have in terms of that. It really means that there's some eyes on those sites.

Prof RAZAY - I'm glad because monitoring is the most essential part of legislation.

Mr SHELTON - Minister, before I get into it, I'd just like to declare an interest and you've mentioned before that I have eight wonderful grandchildren and one great-grandchild now. One of my wonderful grandchildren has Down Syndrome, so just declaring an interest in that.

I note a key measure of the *Disability Rights Inclusion and Safeguarding Act 2024* is the creation of the Tasmanian Disability Inclusion Plan. Can you please let me know how the disability community, loved ones and other interested groups similar to my son and daughter-in-law can be involved in the creation of this plan?

Ms PALMER - Absolutely. Thank you very much and certainly acknowledge the amazing contribution you've made in particular to St Giles over the years with your grandson as your inspiration.

You're quite right. The creation of an inclusion plan is a key measure under the bill, and I'm certainly excited to share today that the consultation process on the plan has now opened. The act creates a requirement that a plan is prepared every 12 months of the commencement of the act. Given the act officially commenced on 1 July this year, we're taking steps to prepare this plan within the timeframe with an aim of publishing the plan in the second half of next year.

Key to the consultation is a discussion paper and it's titled, *Towards a Tasmanian Disability Inclusion Plan*. The discussion paper covers a range of topics impacting people with

disability, including health, housing, education, transport and justice. I'm incredibly aware that we are in the midst of a significant period of reform and our disability community has been consulted many times over the past few years, and I recognise that for some of them they are feeling quite weary.

We've also heard feedback from the disability community that they feel that they're repeating and sharing a lot of the same information with every bit of reform that comes out. As such, this consultation approach summarises and seeks to build on the feedback that we have received to date, through various recent consultation opportunities such as the Disability Royal Commission, our own *Disability Inclusion Act*.

For those who do wish to engage in the discussion paper it is of course critical that the process be made as accessible as possible for those who do wish to participate and the paper itself will be published in accessible formats and that's going to include plain text, Microsoft Word, easy read Word documents, PDF, Braille-ready format. It'll be available in audio, and it will also be available in Auslan. If people require the discussion paper in a different way, they just have to reach out to us and an example of that is that they might need it in another language and we will help them to get that.

We are also ensuring that submissions can be sent in a range of formats. It's not just about having it writing or through an e-mail, but you can also do it through a phone call, through a video and audio files, are other examples of how you can participate. Anyone is welcome to make a submission to the discussion paper or the online survey and our government will be consulting with a number of stakeholders, our peak bodies, our representative organisations, also our defined entities and our public and our Disability Commissioner and the Disability Inclusion Advisory Council.

As part of the consultation process, we've also set up a Tasmanian Disability Inclusion Plan reference group. Included in this group are members of Advocacy Tasmania, Speak Out, Association for Children with Disability, Brain Injury Association of Tasmania, Disability Voices Tasmania, Carers Tasmania, Mental Health Council of Tasmania, Regional Autistic Engagement Network, known as RAEN, National Disability Services and the Department of Premier and Cabinet. And this body of work is being led by Ingrid. The reference group have so far provided advice, and they've provided guidance on consultation with the disability community.

In addition to some webinars that are being held between December this year and February of next year, we're also in the process of finalising some public forums in each of the major regions across Tasmania and we're working to ensure that these forums will be independently facilitated by people with lived experience. As part of our targeted engagement, we're also working with organisations represented on the reference group and intersectional groups to facilitate engagement with their members.

We're excited to see what will come from the consultation process and from the discussion paper, but I do think it's important to reiterate that we are using information and consultation that we've gathered over the last few years to build on that profile in recognition of the fact that we have a number of incredible advocates I've given all this information. Thank you for the question.

Ms HADDAD - My question goes to the breadth of reform that has been seen in the state and across the country. We've got the Disability Royal Commission, the commission of inquiry and national and state action plans and work. It goes a little bit to Ms Rosol's question earlier about what happens when there are ministers competing to implement policy change? I note that the Disability Royal Commission, for example, made recommendation around education, housing, employment, justice systems, but not all of those are within your own ministerial purview as minister for Disability. There has also been criticism around the state-based plan and the national plans around clear targets and indicators as well as sanctions or repercussions for failure to implement them across government.

My question is a whole-of-government one around your role as minister for Disability. Other than your conversations with your colleagues around the Cabinet table and elsewhere, what capacity and power do you have to make sure that they are doing what they need to in their portfolios to adhere to recommendations that have been made by all of those various reforms?

Ms PALMER - That is one of the fundamental roles of a minister when you take carriage of a portfolio. You have to be engaged in all those conversations, those whole-of-government conversations, but it's also important to have another layer to that which is a strong framework to make sure that our government departments are all in the room and having those discussions. I will ask the Deputy Secretary who can talk to you about that framework that we've established, because there are so many different departments who are all involved in these big bodies of reforms. It's important to have that solid framework to ensure that communication is happening.

Ms HADDAD - It needs more than communication, I'd say. It's not a new question, just a comment really. It needs accountability as well as communication.

Ms GRAY - We do have a whole-of-government disability reform steering committee established and that has very senior representation across every single government agency so that we can work with agencies on the various - You're quite right, like, it's a very congested space. There's lots on with the Disability Royal Commission, the NDIS review, the implementation of our own act.

We meet regularly, and it's not uncommon, as you would be aware, across other whole-of-government portfolios to have those points in time where the movement of particular agencies might be a little incongruent. We work together collectively to work through those. But, as you said, that's one thing in a policy space, accountability is really important. That's really embedded in the act through the role of the defined entities.

The act formalises requirements related to disability inclusion, planning and reporting. all State Service agencies and Tasmanian government businesses are, as you're aware, a defined entity under the act and they have specific roles and responsibilities in relation to observing the act principles, contributing to the plan, and implementing the plan. So the development of the plan will be critical in upholding those accountabilities.

Ms HADDAD - I will move to a different topic for my second question, just in the interest of time, and it does cross into your education portfolio, but it is one of those examples of where to ask a question with a whole-of-government ministry, and that is around education.

PUBLIC

It's a specific question from a constituent of mine whose son, Spencer Logan, has been refused a year 13 at high school. He has, until now, had a pretty happy education experience through public schools at state and high school level. He's now at college. He has lifelong profound disabilities with medical and education documentation that support the need for him to remain at school for another year before transitioning into the general community, but he's been told, or his mum's been told through his school that he can't have a year 13 due to funding cuts and restraints. I just wondered - you probably can't speak to a specific example - but what can you tell me about how young people like Spencer are going to continue to be supported through the education system when there are cuts to education, there are cuts to schools, and young people like Spencer are going to be missing out as a result of budget constraints?

Ms PALMER - Your question sits firmly in the Education space. I don't have that information with me, but I'm going to do my best to give you an answer to your question.

First of all, I'm going to have to push back on your comment that there's cuts to schools. We've never had so much resources in our schools as we have now. By next year, we will be at 100 per cent resourcing for the first time ever because of the signing of the Better and Fairer Schools Agreement. We've also never had so much money in educational adjustments, which is the pool of money that we use for schools to make whatever adjustments they might need to make so that we can be really inclusive across our government schools.

There's more than \$150 million that's in that bucket and there's an extra \$10 million that's gone into that in this budget to support schools so that we are inclusive environments. That can be from building a ramp and having a handrail through to some other therapies and maybe a TA that might be required to assist that young person in the school environment. So, a huge investment in this space. There's been no cuts at all.

I am aware of the particular young person that you're speaking about. It wouldn't be appropriate for me to speak to that. I think I have responded to some correspondence around that, but I can assure you that we've done everything we can to ensure that we do have really inclusive practices across our schools. We want to see all children know that their local public school is a school that's for them regardless of abilities or disabilities, and we have had record investment in that space, but I'm happy to speak to you offline about that specific matter that you've raised. In fact, I think some of the correspondence I signed may have even been to you.

Ms HADDAD - My last question in this rotation goes a little bit to a similar issue, which is what happens for people when they are outside - once they finish high school, and I'm sure that you know about Aurora Disability Services. I visited them again recently. They're in the heart of my electorate, and as far as I know, they're the only disability provider that offers lifelong education to adults with significant, complex intellectual and cognitive disability. Funding has been pretty precarious for them, it would be fair to say, in recent years, and they rely substantially on philanthropic and fundraising activities to fund their core services.

They told me recently that they've applied for funding for one full-time teacher position, but they haven't been successful in that so far. They're really asking for two things: (1) recognition of the work that they do and that their clients would otherwise potentially not be having the quality of life that they are able to have through the programs that they deliver at Aurora. They were really passionate providers when I met with them and some of their clients as well, and they said they feel like the system, for want of a better word, just wants these people sitting at home once they finish school, and it's not fair and it's not not a quality of life

that we would want for anybody. They want some recognition of that and recognition that there is a gap and a need when state-based education systems like TAFE and 26Ten and other state-based adult education systems can't accommodate people with profound disabilities, they would like to see that happen as well; but (2) they'd like to know specifically around their funding request for one full-time teacher position.

Ms PALMER - First, I want to acknowledge how amazing the work of Aurora Disability Services is. They have been providing care and support to adults living with disability for about 40 years. When you talk about how passionate they are, yes, I've visited them a couple of times now and there is no denying the level of passion and the extraordinary emotional conviction by the staff.

It's certainly been an absolute privilege to visit them in Glenorchy a number of times, in fact, most recently, I think it was about May of this year. I also acknowledge the continued advocacy of Aurora in seeking support of that pilot program that you spoke about wanting to employ a teacher, my understanding is it's to provide literacy and numeracy and support adults with disability in that education space.

Under the Disability Services portfolio, our government provides program funding to disability organisations primarily through our contribution to the NDIS scheme. Our contribution in 2025-26 will exceed \$280 million and a portion of that is allocated to program funding for disability organisations. The grant process is managed by the federal government and from my own direct conversations with Aurora, I understand it's through this process that they've been unsuccessful in securing that funding in a number of grant rounds.

I certainly do acknowledge the scope of the grants program has become increasingly narrow. I've certainly advocated to the federal government on several occasions now for greater consideration to be given about how that grant program is best supporting the needs of people with disability in the community. I'm very committed to creating a more inclusive and an equitable Tasmania.

We have found that funding model through the NDIS has caused some significant issues to the services that we want to be delivering here in Tasmania. I can tell you that we have been engaging with Aurora, my disability adviser, my senior adviser in this space, Lucy Mercier, has certainly met with them. We try to support them through that grant application process, and we will certainly continue to engage with them.

When I'm talking about the advocacy that I've made around that change in that funding model, I've done that through the Disability Reform Ministerial Council, so making sure that is on the radar of the NDIA, and of the federal minister, and that is the ICL, the Information, Linkages and Capacity Building fund that sits within that funding pool.

Ms ROSOL - Following on that question on Aurora: we have output group 1.7 which is Disability Services, 1.8 is NDIS; so you're saying there's no money in the output group 1.7 for Disability Services for funding at Aurora. I understand that they've put in budget submissions to the Tasmanian government for the position, not just to NDIS, to be funded and at the moment they cook thousands of anzacs every year to try to raise money for what they're doing. Are you saying there's no money in this line that could be allocated to them?

PUBLIC

Ms PALMER - Yes. Our area of funding for those external providers sits in the \$280 million that the Tasmanian government contributes through that.

Ms ROSOL - So you're saying that -

Ms PALMER - What I can tell you is that with the money that you're looking at in that line item, that's reform money. But also, where we need to make sure we are investing is in individual advocacy, because that is not included in what you're able to do with the contribution through the NDIS. We have a focus in ensuring that where you can't get funding through that NDIS grant round because you don't fit that criteria, we have a role to play there in Tasmania for Aurora that we're speaking about; their avenue is through the NDIS. As I said to Ms Haddad, we have had conversations with them and we will continue to engage with them.

Ms ROSOL - Thank you. I have another question around the output in 1.7. I can see it decreases over the forward Estimates and the explanation for this variation is that it reflects the profile of funding in the 2024-25 Budget initiatives, and that's that reform that you've talked about, the implementation of the disability inclusion bill. Is this line reflecting that all that disability reform work will be complete by then? Can you explain the reforms that you consider will have been completed by that time, and can the level of reform be completed? I imagine there are things that continue on.

Ms PALMER - Thank you very much for that question and I will hand over those details to the deputy secretary.

Ms GRAY - The implementation of the act funding is largely allocated to the funding of the Office of the Disability Commissioner and the funding of the Office of the Senior Practitioner. The reform funding that you quite rightly point out ceases, we will assess that funding. As you would be well aware, when you're creating historic reform, as the minister has outlined, and you're fully implementing a very new bill for Tasmania, we don't know what we don't know, so we will implement, as we have outlined, for the next couple of years and then we will assess where we're at with that implementation task there.

Ms ROSOL - Can I clarify one thing from that, then? I know in other departments, the Office of the Independent Regulator and the Office of the Implementation Monitor, they have separate lines showing what funding is allocated to them. It's unknowable in here what the funding is for the disability commissioner and for the senior practitioner. Is that something that you have available? Could that be put on a separate line in future budgets so that we're able to track what's happening in those spaces?

Ms PALMER - Yes, we have that breakdown available.

Ms GRAY - As the minister outlined, we will look at future budgets at the ability to be able to delineate the disability commissioner separately. In response to your question, in the disability implementation of the bill budget, in 2024-25, \$1.5 million; in 2025-26, \$2.35 million; in 2026-27, \$2.35 million; and in 2027-28, \$2.35 million, the total of \$8.55 million. That is split between the Disability Commissioner's Office, \$1.84 million, and the Office of the Senior Practitioner is \$510,000.

Ms ROSOL - Of the \$2.35 million?

PUBLIC

Ms GRAY - \$2.35 million. In 2024-25 the split of the \$1.5 million was \$1.159 million and then \$341,000.

Ms ROSOL - Great, thank you for that information.

Mr Di FALCO - Minister, I know this sort of crosses over into another portfolio, I think you know where this is going, but anyway.

Ms PALMER - I'm actually not sure.

Mr Di FALCO - Okay, no worries. Currently it's proposed that the new application for a gun licence will include a whole grab-bag of irrelevant disabilities which potentially could capture anybody. I'm wondering how doesn't the disclosure of all this information, or personal health information, not be in breach of the *Privacy Act* and the *Disability Discrimination Act*? It's also hard enough to get males to get help for mental issues, when this proposed change actively discourages people getting help.

Ms PALMER - Okay, I think I know what you are referring to. I recall some information coming out about this, but I did think it was more in the mental health space than in the disability space. I mean, it's not in my portfolio, so I don't have that.

I do recall that we did raise this with one of our advocacy groups which is the Disability Voices Tasmania. We did so about a year ago, I think, to seek some feedback on that. I don't have that information in front of me at the moment. But I think it does go back to where we were talking earlier, with Ms Haddad about my role as Disability minister is to look at what is happening across government, and ensure that the voices of people with disability can be seen in the work that's being done. I do recall seeing that and then raising that with one of our advocacy groups.

Mr Di FALCO - I can give you a copy, if you want.

CHAIR - You can't table it, but you can use it for information.

Ms PALMER - But I can take it?

CHAIR - Yes, for information, but you can't table it, no.

Prof RAZAY - There is still some way to change the stigma towards disabled people among the public. I feel we have to promote more people with disability who can live near normal lives, but we have to support them. I believe we should change our city into a more disabled friendly city. My question to you is, what initiative in our budget is helping to promote that? I will give you an example: we could make our pavements more easy for our disabled. You see them with walking with walking frames or using their scooters, and you see all our pavements in shopping centres full of cracks or holes. We could do a great deal to help our disabled -

Mr SHELTON - Local government.

A member - Ask the Local Government minister.

PUBLIC

A member - Try to get into the Parliament House; try to get through those doors.

A member - Well, there's been court action.

CHAIR - Minister, you have the call if you want to answer.

Ms PALMER - With much of what you're talking about, those examples sit with local government, but what I can say is - in fact I will reference your former local councillor, where you were a councillor before we were lucky enough to have you here - conversations I've had in particular with the general manager of the Launceston City Council about our new legislation and the requirements that we are putting on our Government Business Enterprises. A great example of that is the fact that they will need to have their plans done and be accountable about how they're looking when they're developing policies and regulations and legislation. Where is the voice of people with disability? Where is that thoughtfulness in that space?

I also think there are a lot of things that we're doing to ensure that we are really inclusive. A great example of that would be the investment in Changing Places. In this budget, \$300,000 has been allocated for the Changing Places program and we have locations that are being confirmed, about where those Changing Places facilities can be. These are specialised accessible public toilet facilities. It goes beyond your standard accessible bathroom. They have extra light, they have height-adjustable change tables, hoists and other equipment to support people who can't use standard toilets. They make a world of difference for individuals, especially ones with really high needs and their families and their carers. They they can go, let's say, to Port Arthur, and regardless of the high needs they might have, they can see that this is a government that has invested in the infrastructure, that says, 'This is your state, we want you to be here.' That's been an initiative with the Commonwealth government, we went in partnership with them to do that, and it's something we've been really excited about.

I can tell you in Franklin, there's a facility at Kangaroo Bay. Construction is due to begin this year. From swimming pools to sports centres to major tourist areas, we're seeing these facilities go in and they are game changers. They are game changers for families and game changers for people with disability.

Prof RAZAY - Thank you for your answer, but what you are showing in your answer - it's easy to dismiss it as local government - but you are showing how we should work in partnership with federal, state, and local government working together to make our city friendly for disabled people -

CHAIR - The time for scrutiny has expired. The committee will now take a break for lunch. We will return after lunch to examine the Children and Youth portfolio at 1.30 p.m.

Ms ROSOL - We started at 11.47 a.m.

CHAIR - Okay, Mr Shelton has the call. Apologies, I had wrong information.

Mr SHELTON - My question to the minister goes along the lines of Professor Razay's as well. In the 2024 election, you announced that a re-elected Liberal government would develop a sustainable transport solution to address the challenges many Tasmanians living with disabilities face in accessing transport for their everyday needs. How is this commitment progressing?

PUBLIC

Ms PALMER - Thank you very much for the question. Yes, we did make a commitment alongside the then-minister for Transport to develop a sustainable transport solution. What was coming into my office on a regular basis were some horrifying stories of people with disability who had booked a taxi that hadn't come. Some of those examples were at 9.30 p.m. at night in the middle of the city, in the dark, in the cold, and something had gone wrong.

We know that transport can be such a huge barrier to people with disability being able to be spontaneous. Go where they want to go, when they want to go. This was a really important piece of work that I did work on with the Transport minister and acknowledging that there are some really complex situations - that people have a right to move freely. They have a right to go shopping and do the things that perhaps others of us take for granted every day.

So, soon after the election, the Minister for Transport, Eric Abetz, and I hosted a round table with key stakeholders to really unpack some of these challenges. We wanted to hear directly from people who live with this every day. On that round table I had members of the Premier's Disability Advisory Committee, I had members of my own ministerial disability consultative group, and also representatives from Premier and Cabinet and also from State Growth.

One of the key outcomes from that meeting was an acknowledgement that there are simply not enough wheelchair accessible vehicles in Tasmania. In fact, there are some parts of this state where there are none at all. We recognise that taxis and rideshare services are limited or are unavailable in some regions and that's leaving some people with disabilities without any viable options. We agreed that part of the solution may lie in better coordinating the private fleet of accessible vehicles, so those that are operated by independent disability service providers and looking at how that existing capacity could maybe be used and utilised to meet some of the needs that our community was talking to us about.

To take that idea a step further, we engage National Disability Services Tasmania and provided them with project funding so that they could do a body of work and examine the availability of accessible vehicles across Tasmania. I am very pleased to say that we are releasing the results of that report. While the findings certainly confirm and reinforce what we already knew, that there are significant gaps in accessible transport, it is also showing that stakeholders are open to collaboration. They want to find a solution in this space.

There's no quick fix - we accept that - but the report makes a number of recommendations and we're now taking the time to work through that in partnership with our stakeholders and of course people with disabilities. I am very grateful for my new Minister for Transport, the Honourable Kerry Vincent. He's only been in the role for a few months, but I have already made sure that this is on his radar and that he understands the significance of this issue, and he certainly does.

Together, we're going to keep moving through this because we have vehicles in Tasmania and where they're not used over a weekend or where they're not used for a period of time, how could we be better utilising that fleet to ensure that people with disability have accessible transport available to them when and where they need it?

Mr MITCHELL - Minister, it will come as no surprise to you, given the advisers that you've got. The great advice that you're getting - and congratulations on your medal - about the lack of access to the parliamentary precinct for people with disabilities and the poor universal

PUBLIC

access in this precinct, very heavy doors, steps everywhere. What are you doing as disability minister to ensure that the parliamentary precinct becomes an example of best practice for disability access in Tasmania?

Ms PALMER - This is something that I have been advocating for some time now, obviously as disability minister, but also when we had the Honourable Rosemary Armitage who had an injury and popping up all around parliament were these makeshift ramps for her to be able to access parts of the Legislative Council, which was deeply concerning. I have had conversations in my space in the Legislative Council with our president, the Honourable Craig Farrell, and also conversations with our Clerk of the Legislative Council. I have also written to the Premier.

In particular, I note that I do have Ingrid here. There are times when she is my right-hand person in this sort of environment. Not all the rooms are like this beautiful room that we've come to today. It's very much front of mind and I know that the Premier did speak to this the other day and that he is working with the Treasurer. I have taken the Premier on some walkthroughs to make sure he's aware.

Mr MITCHELL - A quick supplementary if I might, Chair. It'll require money. What specifically have you done in seeking a budgetary allocation for the precinct to improve disability access?

Ms PALMER - We've probably not, from my role. I'm not at that point. I've certainly been operating in that advocacy space and trying to highlight the areas of real concern and they do really pertain to around our Chambers, which are old. We have beautiful new part of parliament and our offices here that have been built and designed so that they are accessible for people, but around that kind of historic part of parliament that does present far more complex situations.

CHAIR - The time for scrutiny has expired now. The committee will take a break for lunch. We will return after lunch to examine the Children and Youth portfolio at 1.30 p.m. Thank you, members.

The Committee suspended from 12.48 p.m. to 1.30 p.m.

DIVISION 3

Department of Education, Children and Young People

CHAIR - I welcome the minister and other witnesses to the committee. I invite the minister to introduce persons at the table, names and positions for the benefit of *Hansard*, please.

Ms PALMER - Thank you, Chair. It's my great privilege to introduce to the committee Ginna Webster, our Secretary, to my right. To my left I have Peter Whitcombe, Deputy Secretary. To his left is Tiffany Black, Executive Director Services for Children and Young People and Families, and to the right of the Secretary, Jason Sowell, Director Business Improvement and Planning.

PUBLIC

CHAIR - Thank you, minister. The time scheduled for the Estimates of the Minister for Children and Youth is two-and-a-half hours. Would the minister like to make an opening statement?

Ms PALMER - As the new Minister for Children and Youth, it's been a privilege to lead work that means so much to me personally and to our community. Everything we do is about supporting children, young people and families, and we know how important that is for Tasmania's future. I want to begin by acknowledging the incredible people working in Child Safety, Out of Home Care and Youth Justice. Their dedication, their care and the positive outcomes they deliver make a real difference every single day, and I want them to know that we see your commitment, and we value you deeply.

Our work responding to the commission of inquiry's findings continues to be one of our highest priorities. This isn't just about reforms on paper. It's about rebuilding trust, strengthening safeguards, and ensuring that our systems protect children and young people from harm. Over the past year, we've made strong progress. The changes within Child Safety and Youth Justice operations have helped us create a system that puts children and young people truly at the centre. These changes mean our support can be more consistent, more responsive, and more aligned with what families actually need.

We know there is more to do. The reforms we need are not just about completing recommendations; they're about building a system that works long into the future. My commitment is to ensure that children and young people get the support they need when they need it, and that they are heard, safe and respected. That's why the government is investing \$41.556 million in key deliverables for children and youth in this Budget.

It's also why we're providing a total of \$155.3 million to deliver the new Youth Justice facility. This is a major step forward in delivering the Youth Justice Blueprint 2024 to 2034, which sets the vision for a therapeutic, integrated and child's rights-focused approach to youth offending.

In Out of Home Care, we're ensuring our services reflect the commission of inquiry's, recommendations and better meets the needs of young people. We recognise the over-representation of Aboriginal children and young people in our systems, and we're committed to genuine reform. We continue to work in genuine partnership with Aboriginal community-controlled organisations to deliver culturally grounded, place-based services that provide the right support in the right way.

This Budget reflects a simple message: we will continue to invest in the safety, wellbeing and future of Tasmania's children, because when we support children and families, we are strengthening the whole state.

I'm happy to answer any questions from the committee.

Mrs GREENE - Thank you, minister, for your introduction. I also wish to place on record my appreciation to staff. When a parent is desperate, or a teacher is worried, or a neighbour hears a child in distress, the first door they often knock on, or call, is the Strong Families Safe Kids advice and referral line (ARL). Calls to the ARL continue to rise quarter after quarter, but the FTE hasn't been designed to grow with demand. The risk is clear - when the front door is overwhelmed, children wait longer for help and crises can escalate. With calls

PUBLIC

increasing every quarter, what additional frontline staffing has been allocated to ensure children and families aren't left waiting for help?

Ms PALMER - One of the first places that I went to when I got this portfolio was to meet so many of the amazing staff who work in this space. I have had the opportunity, although to be honest, it was not enough time to spend time with our workers in the south, the north-west and in the north. It was pretty inspiring to have time with them and to see the work that they do and the decisions that they have to make. It was fantastic to have that time to see them firsthand.

Strong Families Safe Kids' advice and referral line, the ARL, has certainly changed the way we respond to children's safety and wellbeing, how we support families and how government services collaborate with non-government and community organisations to keep children and young people safe. All concerns that are received by the ARL are meticulously triaged to access the most appropriate course of action. It was brilliant to have the opportunity to look at how these wraparound services and the interventions are able to be put in place. Of course, it all starts with that phone call through to our ARL staff. With regard to the other part of your question, I'll hand that to the deputy secretary.

Mr WHITCOMBE - Through you, minister. In relation to your question, we have approximately 100 FTE working in the advice and referral line at the moment. Certainly, caller volumes have grown year on year. In 2018, there were approximately 8000 calls to that service and every year that's grown, and it was over 24,000 calls in the last year.

We would suggest that over the course of the last two to three years there's been a growing visibility about the needs of children. The commission of inquiry has prompted a lot of that and there's been increased understanding across the children's workforce about their obligations and requirements around reporting and recognising those matters that need to go through to the advice and referral line.

We see the increase in utilisation of the advice and referral line as a good thing. It means that people are reaching out, they're sharing information, they're asking for advice and, where appropriate, we're seeing that brokerage and bridging to the supports that they need.

We undertook as a service last year, during 2024, a review of the advice and referral line and that review had a range of recommendations that were really about with the increase in volume, with the maturation of the service, what did we need to do to make sure we continue to learn and grow as a service.

In the course of this year, we established a small project team to help with implementing those recommendations. The first part of that was about how we can be more responsive. You made mention of those increased volumes and how we ensure that that there is responsiveness. In its heaviest periods, we've seen wait times for calls as high as 55 minutes and in the course of this year we've had periods where that wait time has been down to an average of about 20 seconds. It's a huge shift and that shift has been about the times that we have our staff on and we're there in terms of rostering and making sure they're available to take those calls.

We have additionally seen, shorter wait times for those matters that are significantly more serious go from the advice and referral line through to our child safety service. There's been a significant decrease in the period of time taken to transfer through to the child safety service.

PUBLIC

We had a really significant backlog at the start of the year and I believe it was the right thing to do to, in many ways, grow our workforce for a period of time to enable the outstanding unallocated conversations to be addressed, looked at, and worked through to make sure we weren't missing any matters of critical importance for children.

Mrs GREENE - You call it growing the workforce, but I call it outsourcing because that's what happened, with that outsourcing to Tradewind. I guess what outsourcing the ARL assessments to Tradewind signalled is that the internal capacity within ARL and child safety was diminishing and outsourcing safety assessments raises serious concerns about risk and continuity and quality, but also cost to the public.

Can you table the review document that you mentioned for ARL last year because that would be very beneficial? Can you also outline what the cost was for growing the workforce way out by outsourcing to Tradewind? Can you talk a little more about what caused that large waitlist last year and why that decision was made? What were the specifics that led to that situation?

Ms PALMER - Mrs Greene, I will refer that question in a moment. There's quite a bit of detail there, so I'll give the team the opportunity to find that information.

Obviously, the situation with the backlog happened prior to my time as minister in this space, but I have had some great discussions with the team about that. Whilst I accept where you're coming from, we had a situation where there was a backlog and we had to prioritise the safety of children. I wasn't the minister at the time, but if I had been, I would have supported that. We can't put anything before making sure that we are doing everything we can and pulling every lever we can. I think that's really important.

I guess the analogy I will put on the table there is that when we have a bushfire and our amazing services respond, if we need to, we call in support to help us in those situations. That's exactly what's happened here. There was a situation where we were not sure if, in that backlog, there could have been young people with significant issues who we needed to attend to, so we called in reinforcements to ensure that we were able to deal with that backlog.

I think some of what Peter just spoke to and may reiterate again is, since that time there has been a review of how we manage that. We don't want to be in that situation again. We've done a review to look at how we move forward and how we ensure that we don't end up with a backlog again.

Are you comfortable, secretary?

Ms WEBSTER - Through you, minister. I'd also add that, this is not an outsourcing activity per se. This was an event that occurred where we needed to address the safety of young people and we took that very, very seriously. I think the minister's analogy is a good one. We have worked with the non-government sector in ARL very successfully for a long period of time and that has worked very well. We want to make sure that we deliver the best services that we possibly can to children and young people. This was something that was quite extraordinary in terms of what we did, but we had to make sure we prioritised the safety of children and young people, and I stand by that decision.

PUBLIC

Ms ROSOL - Minister, I'd like to ask some questions about the \$3.7 million election commitment the government made to JCP Youth. Was this commitment based on any advice from the Department for Education, Children and Young People?

Ms PALMER - Thank you very much for the question. The government has certainly upheld its commitment to support diversionary programs for at-risk young people with the JCP Youth funding agreement signed on 3 February 2025, as you say, funded to a \$3.7 million over three years to expand its engagement with at-risk young people statewide through its established Beast program. These are the sort of programs that we need to be investing in. This is working in the preventative space. This is making sure that we are able to reach out to young people and really support them through programs like this.

The funding directly supports 54 program placements from the Department for Education, Children and Young People, which will be equitably distributed across the south, the north and the north-west and there will be flexibility to prioritise areas of greatest need.

In addition to this, this investment provides resources that enable JCP Youth to engage a further 36 community-based referrals, broadening the program's reach and impacting of course, JCP's diversionary programs which are targeted at young males aged 11 to 17 who may be demonstrating some of that at-risk behaviour that we know can lead to contact with the youth justice system.

Ms WEBSTER - The department had been working with JCP Youth for some time before that. Again, it was before my time, but I am happy to hand to the deputy secretary in terms of the process of the work of JCP Youth.

Ms ROSOL - I am particularly asking whether the commitment was based on advice from anyone in DECYP, or any advice at all to support the decision to fund JCP Youth with \$3.7 million.

Ms PALMER - That needs to go to the deputy secretary to talk about the department's engagement at that time.

Mr WHITCOMBE - Simply put, our service had been, as has been mentioned, engaging with JCP on a fee-for-service basis, and it has been certainly my experience when I speak with staff across the service that they're incredibly grateful and there are strong relationships in the way that our frontline youth justice and child safety practitioners work alongside JCP.

We have worked closely with JCP in the development of the contract and the specs and the obligations we have to Child and Youth Safe Standards and continue to work closely with JCP and, in particular, the support that they provide to some of our most vulnerable young people in the community.

Ms ROSOL - Can I clarify then there wasn't any advice from DECYP because nothing any of you have said suggests there was advice from DECYP for that funding. Can I assume then that was a Liberal Party decision to provide that \$3.7 million funding?

Ms PALMER - I wasn't the minister at the time, so I, obviously, wasn't engaged in those conversations, but I do believe that the department has clearly outlined that there was already a relationship, that they were working with this organisation and seeing outcomes for young

people. It wasn't an organisation that was new to the department, but you're asking a question that I don't believe the department can answer and I can't answer because I wasn't the minister at the time.

Prof RAZAY - The commission of inquiry reported that 43 employees of the department of Education were suspended between January 2000 and February 2023, and nearly half of them since 2020. What I find disappointing is that department of Education staff still do not believe our children and young people when they report child abuse. That's not just the department of Education over the years, but it applies to our society in how we dismiss children and young people when they report it. I believe it is important to change that stigma because I believe if a child or young person reports child abuse, we should accept it as true.

What strategy do we have to implement to reduce the sexual abuse against children in school by employees and also by other students? What kind of support, including school psychologists, are available to support children who disclose sexual abuses in schools?

Ms PALMER - Thank you very much. There is so much we can talk about in this space. I'm very excited that you have asked this question. Every employee in the department shares the responsibility for upholding these rights and preventing and responding to child abuse. As we know, safeguarding our children is everybody's responsibility and the department is really committed to building a child-safe culture in which every child and young person is kept safe from harm and that their views are listened to. That's really important, and that they are respected and all employees understand and comply with their obligations to prevent and respond to information around child abuse.

Our safeguarding framework - Safe, Secured, Supported - describes an overarching approach to safeguarding children and young people from abuse. There has been some real action in this space. All departmental employees, release staff, volunteers and external providers must complete annual safeguarding training now, supported by a range of proactive strategies and resources. All of our government schools have safeguarding leads in them and we have safeguarding champions in our libraries now, because we know this is a place where the public come to.

For more details on what we've done in this space, I will hand to the secretary.

Ms WEBSTER - Thank you for the question. I would say that the premise of that is not my experience. We absolutely do take what children say very seriously, and, in my experience, much more seriously than I have ever seen it.

The 'Tell Someone' campaign has been a great campaign. I personally receive all the investigations under Employment Direction 5 (ED5); I'm the delegate for making determination whether or not to commence a code of conduct. I'm also the delegate for determining whether there's been a breach of the code of conduct. I read every Tell Someone notice, I read every concern notice, I read every civil redress claim, I read the investigation report. I meet with the team on a weekly basis and I take that very, very seriously.

Obviously the rules of natural justice have to apply. If someone does make an allegation, we have to test that allegation. We want to do that in a trauma-informed way. We test whether or not the person wants to be a witness to that. In many cases in civil redress and in civil litigation they don't, and that's their prerogative, and I completely understand that. But we do

have to give the person that has been subject to that allegation the opportunity to respond. If there is any allegation of child sexual abuse, we stand the person down immediately, and I personally stand them down under Employment Direction 4.

I believe that we have a much stronger system in place to take those allegations seriously across, even though this is not the education Estimates, across the portfolio, but certainly for anyone in child safety and youth justice as well. Obviously we're mandatory reporters. We must report to the advice and referral line, but we also report to Tasmania Police. As soon as an allegation of child sexual abuse is received, we report to the registrar to work with vulnerable people, Tasmania Police, the Integrity Commission and the office of the independent regulator.

That probably does account also for the additional responses to the ARL, because where there are multiple responses, multiple reports around a range of things. I take that very seriously and I do read everything. Even if we are unable to substantiate the recommendation, we always get back to the child in a trauma-informed way, whether it's through the school or through the carer. It isn't perfect. It's not perfect yet, because unfortunately people who abuse children are in our community.

It is a difficult read, I have to say, with those ED5s and all the information, but I personally read them all.

Prof RAZAY - I would like to thank you for your reassurance about the implementation of the commission report.

Mr SHELTON - Thank you, Chair. Minister, one of the most amazing ladies that I've come across in my life was a foster carer. She supported many children over her lifetime. Unfortunately, I won't mention her name because breast cancer has taken her from us at the moment. I do have to clarify that just slightly in front of her would be my dear old mum and my wife, but she was an amazing lady, supporting those people who were on the frontline basically of dealing with our children in that situation. My question goes to how this interim budget is prioritising foster and kinship carers?

Ms PALMER - Thank you very much for that question. I acknowledge and recognise your comments there, which is lovely.

It probably would be appropriate for me to also acknowledge and recognise the work that Ms Rosol and her family have and the contribution that she has made in the foster care area for some time. Our foster carers, they're just vital. They're just so valuable to our communities and of course to our Out of Home Care system. We acknowledge them and thank them for their deep commitment, for the way that they offer such safe and nurturing environments to children and young people when they need them the most.

Our government is certainly committed to improving the lives of children and young people, and particularly those who are supported by our child safety system who spend time in Out of Home Care. Out of Home Care provides a vital service for children and young people who are assessed as being unable to live safely at home. Ensuring that children and young people under the guardianship of the secretary are safe and receive high quality care that effectively meets their ongoing needs is an enduring priority.

PUBLIC

The department currently partners with community sector organisations to deliver care for approximately 1000 children and young people across Tasmania. Between all providers, there are approximately 850 carers in Tasmania who are providing both foster and kinship care. We've invested an additional funding of \$15 million over two years in the 2025-26 budget to support the continued delivery of quality Out of Home Care delivered by the child safety service. This funding builds on the \$120 million allocated in the 2024-25 years over four years to meet increasing costs of out of home care in relation to foster and kinship care, respite and salaried care and special care packages.

As part of the 2025 Tasmanian State election, the government committed to provide a 15 per cent increase to the base rate of support payments for all foster and formal kinship carers and we've delivered on our commitment by providing just over \$2 million over 12 months in 2025-26. A national review of financial models and support for family-based carers across Australian jurisdictions is currently under way and we anticipate we will get some of those recommendations later this year. This one-year commitment is reflecting our acknowledgement that reform work is being progressed through Bright Lives: Uplifting Care initiative and that as this work progresses, we will gain a more comprehensive understanding of the evolving needs of children in Out of Home Care and the evolving needs of their carers.

This temporary uplift provides immediate support while ensuring future investment. is guided by genuine consultation, guided by lived experience and the outcomes of the broader reform agenda. In recognition of the pivotal role that kinship and foster carers play in caring for our children and young people, work to develop a carer recruitment, support and retention strategy is being prioritised.

The strategies being developed in partnership with family-based carers, the non-government sector and with child safety and Out of Home Care. Development of the strategy will include identifying immediate actions that can be taken to improve support for carers alongside development of the longer-term strategy. Establishing a carer recruitment, support and retention strategy was a recommendation from the commission of inquiry, sub recommendation 9.8, and its development is being considered in the context of other relevant commission of inquiry recommendations The strategy will aim to improve recruitment of carers, increase the availability and accessibility of supports for carers.

That's including things like training, support networks and financial support. To improve the retention of carers to avoid potential future shortages. Discussions to inform the development of this strategy have commenced with the Tasmanian government Out of Home Care employees as well as the fostering kinship carer advisory group and also an independent expert panel which was established to inform the uplifting care work program.

Our service provider partners have also been invited to participate in discussions to inform the development of the strategy over the coming months. We know that family-based care leads to better outcomes and really important and why we've made it a priority to be investing in our carers who open their homes and their hearts, and they welcome vulnerable children and young people into their families. We certainly thank them for that.

Mrs GREENE - Thank you. Before I go to my next round of questions, I wanted to confirm the report I mentioned would be tabled. I got a nod, but nothing on record.

PUBLIC

Ms PALMER - I will seek some advice on that. We have no problem there. We can table that.

Mrs GREENE - Thank you, minister. Protecting vulnerable children requires protecting the workforce that supports them. Can you outline what support and retention measures have been implemented to ensure that we have the ARL and child safety officers we need?

Ms PALMER - Absolutely. There's been a huge body of work that's been done in this area. We are so grateful for the work that they do. There's certainly been significant investment in this workforce. The provision of the Child Safety Workforce Package provided some really critical funding to support the recruitment and the retention of our child safety officers, particularly in the north-west. The improvement in staffing levels has increased the number of children in care with allocated primary workers.

In July 2024, a new \$4.5 million workforce package - across the 2024-25 to 2027-28 budgets - was announced. Approximately \$3 million on top of the initial child safety payment of a pro rata payment of \$5200 was paid for eligible AHP-classified child safety, ARL, and youth justice employees. Over \$750,000 for up to 15 per cent increase by way of a market allowance in addition to base rates for eligible child safety and youth justice employees in the north-west to retain urgently needed services in this region. Approximately \$250,000 in relocation support for settling-in payments of \$5000 for staff commencing or who are transferring to the north-west region. Up to \$500,000 to support current and prospective employees to undertake qualifications required for employment in a child safety officer role. With that, I might go to the secretary.

Ms WEBSTER - Thank you. We've also been progressing some short and longer-term strategies to build the child safety workforce profile. We do know there is a national shortage of child safety workers. It's a very challenging job. We want to make sure we attract as many people as we can within this state. We've convened a child and youth workforce round table just to provide us some insights and recommend actions into current workforce challenges in both government, but also the community sector. As part of that round table, we would have the unions represented, but also community organisations who we work with in both child safety and youth justice, because we actually work very closely across those partnerships in that portfolio. We are meeting again next week. We will produce a report on the immediate and forecast workforce shortages that are experienced by the sector and develop a range of actions to actually address that. As I said, that's part of a whole cross-sector reform.

We are also co-designing a children and families workforce strategy for the sector with government and community partners, which is in response to commission of inquiry recommendation 9.10. That will be informed by the workforce roundtable in 2026. There's also a package of targeted scholarships and pathway initiatives from 2026 to 2028 aimed at building the child safety and youth justice officer workforce. This will include a range of measures to attract new intra- and interstate graduates and invest in existing support staff to achieve qualifications via some of the TasTAFE and university pathways.

The other really important thing is we have a structure within child safety and youth justice that can support some movement between those areas. We're working with many times the same children, with the same families. That sort of collaboration and cross-fertilisation of those workers is really important. They work together closely now, but having a system where if someone I think is able to move from one area to another because they're needing a break in

PUBLIC

this environment is really important. There are other wellbeing strategies that we have in place as well for this workforce. We know it is a really challenging role and we're dealing with some very difficult situations.

Mr WHITCOMBE - In the course of the year that I've been in the role, I believe that there's a good story to tell this year in terms of recruitment and retention of child safety officers. We've reached a point, in terms of our FTE allocation, where we are at or above across our case-management teams and, in particular, when I think about the north-west that had particular challenges, they are a team that are at their full FTE complement as well, and the workforce incentives and package has been really successful in that.

We've taken a different approach to recruitment this year and there's been a degree of social media and further reach, and those different approaches, alongside speeding up the recruitment process, I believe have been really effective in bringing a workforce through. We know there's more work to do and we know that it's also just as important around how we support the staff that we have to stay and grow and develop, which our secretary has been speaking to. This is an area of progress for our child safety service in the state.

Mrs GREENE - I agree. There has been progress, but when we see that referrals are still still quite high, that workload is increasing, that the FTE number of positions isn't growing with that demand - I'm glad that you mentioned the child safety workforce package. I think they were good measures; however, workers took industrial action just this morning in child safety because some of those retention measures ceased in June or July - so July, August, September, October, now in November. I was of the understanding that those measures were meant to be extended until December of this year, but they haven't even received the payment for the last five months. Could we have some further detail around that, please.

Ms PALMER - Absolutely, and we will ask Sue McKerracher to come to the table, deputy secretary in this space. I am aware that CPSU members are taking industrial this week. We are so incredibly grateful for the contribution that they do make in helping our young people feel safe and well. We know that their work varies daily, and while I know, because they shared with me how incredibly rewarding it is, they also shared how incredibly challenging it can be. As I said earlier, they were some of the first people I went to engage with and to meet and connect with when I became minister, across the state, and heard of their passion and their commitment in this space. I will go through the secretary to the deputy secretary.

Ms McKERRACHER - We absolutely endorse the fact that child safety officers earn every cent that they get, and it has been our intention to use whatever means we can to retain those really excellent staff we have. There was an agreement, an award which expired on 30 June 2025, but we worked with the union, and we've worked with our own staff and stakeholders, and the matter is currently about to go into the tribunal to be an order of variation to that agreement. When that is passed by the TIC, we will be able to then provide back pay for the staff that have been involved. What that will mean is that employees at AHP levels 1 to 3 who have been employed on or after 1 July 2025, they will receive a child safety payment of \$100 per fortnight pro rata, and they will be back paid to 1 July.

Mrs GREENE - Thank you, and that will only go until December of this year?

Ms McKERRACHER - We're then entering into negotiations around the new agreement.

PUBLIC

Mrs GREENE - Yes, the delay is disappointing, given the last five months staff haven't been receiving that payment, where the first part of the year they were. I note that you're also using this language around allied health professionals. I note that there are a lot of staff within child safety and ARL that are on the general stream: support workers and unit coordinators and DLOs. Are there any measures or incentives to ensure that we attract and retain general stream staff within the service?

Ms WEBSTER - Obviously the award is being currently negotiated. Other than working through the log of claims from that perspective, we want to retain all of those staff, and they do an amazing job. They're part of the team. We are currently obviously going through the industrial relations process for the PSUWA.

Mrs GREENE - They weren't part of that initial workforce package?

Ms WEBSTER - No.

CHAIR - Before we go on, I want to talk about time limits. As people have been in the previous hearings with me as Chair, I'm not invoking the strict three-minute response. I'm being lenient to both sides. But if both sides can keep as close as they can to the limits, that would be much appreciated from both sides, please. Also, if I can remind all members to direct all questions through or to the minister when they go on. Ms Rosol.

Ms ROSOL - Thank you, Chair. Minister, I'd like to come back to JCP. Documents obtained by the Greens under RTI show that JCP had previously sought government funding and been unsuccessful, I think on two occasions. One email from a department official stated:

To date, I have no indication that the operational areas are seeking the BEAST service response.

Perhaps through you to the deputy secretary, minister, did that change? We do know there was work under way for a very small, limited service in the north-west, but any point before the announcement, did operational areas in DECYP express that they wanted the BEAST service response to receive significant statewide funding support?

Ms PALMER - I think that the issue we have with this is that I wasn't the minister at the time, the secretary wasn't the secretary at the time, and we didn't have Peter, our deputy secretary, either. I don't have knowledge of that information to be able to share with you. All I can say is that, prior to that election commitment, I'm informed by the deputy secretary that JCP was not new to them, they were already in that space in accordance with what the deputy secretary put on the record before.

Ms ROSOL - I suppose it's interesting because there would have been many organisations that DECYP was working with, and they weren't offered \$3.7 million in funding despite doing some quite amazing work with young people. I don't know if you know the answer to this question, but how was the \$3.7 million figure arrived at? Do you know if it was a suggestion that came from JCP Youth as a figure?

Ms PALMER - I will seek some advice on that. I apologise. We simply were not involved, any of the three of us, in this portfolio at that time.

PUBLIC

Ms ROSOL - Okay, I understand that. Is there anyone else in the room who would have knowledge of that who might be able to come to the table and speak to it?

Ms WEBSTER - From a general basis, the public service would not be involved in election commitments or commitments from any other - whether it's the current government or opposition at the time. These things are outside of the public service. We are not involved in election commitments. We implement government policy.

Ms ROSOL - You're saying this was an election commitment that didn't come up through DECYP as a suggestion; is that what you're confirming?

Ms PALMER - If your questions could come through me.

Ms ROSOL - Is that what you're confirming there, through you, minister?

Ms PALMER - We've made it really clear that no one here at the table was involved in that so we can't answer the questions that you're asking because we simply do not have knowledge of that. I don't as a minister, the secretary and the deputy secretary don't either. What I can speak to is the fact that JCP Youth's BEAST Program fits with the diversionary approaches and the direction that we want to go in. We know that it works in an area where they have a contact point with young males between the age of 11 and 17 who quite possibly could be heading towards an interaction with the youth justice system and we're trying to ensure that we are investing in those preventative measures.

The program that's being funded certainly fits within what we're wanting to do in that diversionary space.

Ms ROSOL - Thank you, minister. I find it concerning that something that's such a large amount of money in the public interest, that that knowledge seems to have been lost because of a change of positions. That's troubling from a public-interest perspective. Thank you.

Ms JOHNSTON - Minister, when we should be doing all we can to keep young people out of the court system and out of detention, our youth diversion rates in Tasmania are almost 40 per cent down on what they were 10 years ago and it's one of the lowest youth diversion rates in the country. Why is this? Why are we continuing to decline in youth diversion rates across all areas?

Ms PALMER - We're certainly committed to developing a youth justice system that does achieve better outcomes for young people and for their families and, of course, balancing that with keeping our community safe. This includes implementing a range of early intervention, prevention and diversion programs and options and supporting children and young people who are on bail. The government is investing \$1.5 million to support innovative local initiatives and partnerships that target the root causes of youth offending in local communities and that are engaging children and young people certainly in education, in training across employment, sport is a big one, and of course the arts.

The Youth After-hours Diversion Service pilot began on 7 May from the Glenorchy Police Station, as an example, delivering an after-hours engagement and referral service through the community sector to children and young people who are coming into contact with police. The Youth Justice Diversionary Services Framework was released in June of this year,

and it sets out requirements for funded diversionary services in Tasmania that are aligned to the youth justice model of care, contemporary evidence and best practice. Of course, this does align with commission of inquiry recommendation that the government develop a Youth Justice Diversionary Services Framework and begin delivering that framework by 2020.

I will see if the secretary has more to add to that.

Ms WEBSTER - Thank you. The key is that we now have a more holistic approach to youth justice diversion with the youth justice reform taskforce - that was commenced in the Department of Premier and Cabinet - now having come back to the Department for Education, Children and Young People. It is a much more holistic picture than what we have, and I think what we've probably seen, and I can't speculate on the reasons why that is, but I can say that we need a system that's actually joined up. I think the taskforce and the Youth Justice Blueprint provides an opportunity for us to have a holistic service.

You have to have the service providers to divert those young people, too, successfully. With the Youth Justice Framework, it clearly sets out what our expectations are for those diversionary services and what we expect to implement over coming years. This is an opportunity for us to do that in a holistic way, whereas I'm not sure that we have done that in the past. We've had a lot of interventions, but I think now we've got a joined-up process of interventions.

Ms JOHNSTON - Thank you for that. My concern, as the data shows, is that in 2014-15 54.4 per cent of young offenders were diverted and if you jump to 2023-24 it's only 35.6 per cent, so that's a significant decrease. It's not marginal, it's a substantial decrease. Despite the work that you've talked about being done, the system is getting worse. The situation is getting worse for young people and looking forward then to what we will be doing differently to try to change that around.

I am concerned, minister, that your government has an 'adult crime, adult time' philosophy and ideology. That will only worsen the situation moving forward if that's the position adopted by the government. I look to you, minister: will you be a strong voice for your children and young people and Cabinet against 'adult crime, adult time' laws and the importance of youth diversion?

Ms PALMER - Where my focus is as the minister in this space is on the causes of crime and I want to be tough on the causes of crime. We know that some of the young people that we are engaging with it's a hard read.

When you look at what life has dealt them in a short period of time - and I would have to say that even after 25 years as a journalist, when you think you've read every horrible news story that you can, you come into this space and you understand that there's some real trauma with some of the young people we are dealing with. We need to be looking at how do they get to that position? How do they end up in that space? That's clearly where my focus is, and it's certainly where the department's focus is. The passion in this team is like nothing I have ever seen, even though I've only been in this role for a few months - to really have such a strong focus and such compassion and drive to see a change across what is actually causing this to happen.

PUBLIC

Where do we need to be working more with families? How do we get to these young people early? There's a crossover for me into the education space, because we know disengagement from education is something that we see right across children who are engaged in the youth justice system.

My focus is, I don't want to get to that point. I want us to be working and throwing everything that we have into ensuring they don't get to a point where there is a disengagement, and I'll just ask the deputy secretary for further comment.

Mr WHITCOMBE - I want to paint a picture: if we were to look back 24 years, we know that rates of youth offending were significantly higher then than they are now and over the last three years we have seen really post-COVID in many ways some lifting of youth offending rates. But I would want it to be on the record that just 13 per cent of crime in the state is committed by children and young people.

Often there can be an overemphasis on them. As the minister has said, these are children first and we need to be absolutely tough on the causes of youth crime. That doesn't mean that we're soft on crime and that children and young people don't need consequences for their actions. All of us do. But children need equally the support and services wrapped around them and their situations that's unique to them in the right way at the right time.

The steps that we have taken and some of our early data shows, in terms of the investment and services, but also the way that we practice within our agency, means that we're getting results. I look at the north and the north-west community youth justice teams who, with a bit of extra capacity, have been able to have more of the through-care approach and consequently have low rates of children and young people entering Ashley Youth Detention Centre. That's strongly borne out in the data. I think they have 23 per cent of the population and Ashley from the north and northwest.

We know that service provision around not just those things that are addressing offending behaviour, but around mental health, drug and alcohol issues, homelessness, and making sure that young people have the safe adults in their lives as our pathway forward and that is the system that we're building.

The *Youth Justice Act* at the moment in many ways orientates the system of support post-offending and we believe that there's an opportunity ahead of us as we work through the review of the *Youth Justice Act* to front load some of that support and intervention and response to young people. That's going to be foundational in our future.

Ms JOHNSTON - I absolutely agree. The criminologist in me absolutely agrees. It's a very small percentage of young people we're talking about here, but that doesn't stop your government from talking about adult crime, adult time. I'm asking will you be a champion for young people and children within Cabinet that adult crime, adult time laws do not work and actually harm young people? Will you be that champion in Cabinet against that policy?

Ms PALMER - I will absolutely be a champion for the Youth Justice Blueprint that has been put forward. That is a great body of work, its evidence based, and it has provided our government with a pathway forward. I absolutely understand, and my heart goes out to the families who are impacted through not just youth crime, but crime right across the board. I absolutely get that.

PUBLIC

My focus is looking at this as a whole picture. As I said, everything that we are doing is about making sure young people don't get there. We don't have them. We don't want them in our youth justice facilities. We don't want them engaging in the law. What can we do? What can we be doing? Through education, through numerous reforms, through therapeutic services, through supporting our families, through bringing baby home, what are the things that we know we can wrap around families to ensure that there's a different trajectory to the one that history might be laying out so.

That's where my focus is. The Youth Justice Blueprint was endorsed by our government, so that's my roadmap.

Mr SHELTON - Minister, I thoroughly agree with what you've been saying. Talking about families, I've talked about my grandkids somewhat and being a grandparent. It's not that long ago that I was a parent and of course it can be the most rewarding, but also -

Ms PALMER - You're still a parent.

Mr SHELTON - I'm still a parent, but with young kids growing up, and difficult at times, of course and to those parents that haven't reached grandparenthood, I can say with a smile, grandparenthood is a fantastic stage of life. When you can hand them back at the end of the day, marvellous. Nevertheless, a lot of families don't have that support and it's difficult and it makes it more difficult if a family has a child with complex needs. My question is around what is the government doing to assist those families who happen to have somebody or a child with complex needs?

Ms PALMER - That leads in beautifully from the question Ms Johnston was posing to us just before your question. I can talk to Bringing Baby Home initiative. That actually commenced as part of our government's child and youth wellbeing strategy. It's a vital program delivered by our non-government partners to strengthen parenting capacity, to strengthen safety and general family functioning. We provided \$10.32 million over four years in 2025-26 to deliver Bringing Baby Home to new parents and their baby by providing that support for families so that they can remain together safely at home. If a child safety service holds concerns for a family caring for an infant, they can make a referral to the Bringing Baby Home program with the family's consent.

The program is designed to support and educate parents to build parenting capacity and safety. The aim is for the infant to remain at home and not require statutory care. The Bringing Baby Home initiative is delivered by our community partners while the Child Safety Service continues to assess the functioning, the safety and the well-being of the infant and in some cases other siblings as well.

Residential workers provide 24/7 support and education in accommodation that's provided, and they can assist with all sorts of things, including some of those day-to-day tasks, helping to transport to and from appointments. This particular support Bringing Baby Home is delivered to families for three months. It's quite an intensive period of time. I can tell you that, over the last four years, of the 56 families that have engaged with the program, 46 infants have remained safely in their parents' care. That's an incredible outcome and it truly reflects the highly skilled team that is delivering this important program by providing life changing support for vulnerable infants.

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Most importantly, it states volumes to the parents who are prepared to put their trust in the Bringing Baby Home program, that they feel safe enough to be vulnerable and to really embrace that support. It's not easy when you're a new parent and someone's trying to give you all the advice in the world, so they do an amazing job as parents to take that on board. The outcomes speak for themselves: 56 families involved and 46 of those infants have remained safely in their parents' care.

So again, when talking to Ms Johnston about where we want to be focusing our efforts, places just like that.

Mrs GREENE - I also have a few questions around the Bringing Baby Home program. I note the investment. It's wonderful that those infants were able to stay with their family as opposed to staying in a Bringing Baby Home house. Can you outline how many houses are in that program and what region of the state they're in?

Ms PALMER - I'll refer that question to the deputy secretary.

Mr WHITCOMBE - Through you, minister, I would need to take advice and get that back within session.

Ms PALMER - Yes, sure. We'll get that information and we'll get it back to you before the end of the session.

Mrs GREENE - Thank you.

CHAIR - Minister, you're taking that on notice?

Ms PALMER - No, I'm not taking it on notice. We're going to get that information before the end of the session. I just want to clarify, it's the number of homes and where?

Mrs GREENE - Yes. How many homes and what region they are in? My understanding is that there currently aren't any homes in the north-west coast of Tasmania as part of that program. I may be wrong, so I'm hoping for some clarification on that.

Ms PALMER - We'll get that before the end of the session.

Mrs GREENE - Can you also outline what the criteria is for a family entering that program? My understanding was that it was for families who are very vulnerable, but from the answer you've just given, maybe I'm wrong. Perhaps you could share a little more about how a family can be referred into that program?

Mr WHITCOMBE - Through you, minister, I don't have the list of criteria right in front of me, but particular to that Bringing Baby Home service, often we do get referrals for unborn children. We know that the first 1000 days, but in particular those first 100 days of a child's life are critically important. Often the families that are referred are families who may have other siblings who have been in care. One of the things that the minister didn't mention in terms of the 46 children that haven't gone into state care as a result of the service has been the siblings of those children. There's been opportunities for them to be reunified within their families as well.

PUBLIC

For those families who have ultimately had children enter state care, it's provided the time and space to work with them and often their wider kin network and establish kin carer options, establish solid relationships and have a much stronger plan in place for them into the future. I hope that helps.

Mrs GREENE - A final question on Bringing Baby Home. The money that's in the budget, is that to expand the Bringing Baby Home program, or is it to maintain the current program?

Ms PALMER - I would have to seek some advice on that. I'll see if I can get that information. What I can say is the funding allocation is \$2.58 million per annum across four years, so 2025-26 through 2028-29. I can say that my understanding of the program at a high level is that yes, we are talking about those vulnerable families. I think we're talking about, as the deputy secretary mentioned, even before they've been born. Also, I've been advised of situations where a baby's been born and they're able to go from hospital into this program, which is a game-changer.

We'll get that information for you about the number of houses and where they are in the region. Did you want that to add something?

Mr WHITCOMBE - I did want it to be clear, within this room, that not always within the Bringing Baby Home service do the families go to a particular home that is provided. Sometimes it's absolutely appropriate that the services are coming into the home where they are. That is part of the Bringing Baby Home model as well. So, that's important.

Ms ROSOL - I'm following up on JCP Youth. In an email from a principal policy and project officer from DECYP on 24 June 2024, the officer asked JCP to provide them with a written proposal reflecting what they intended to use the \$3.7 million for. The document then provided in response by JCP was also dated June 2024. To be clear, four months after the funding commitment was made, that was the first time that there was a written proposal that was laid out for how this money would be spent. Are you able to confirm that at all?

Ms PALMER - I will have to seek some advice on that. No, sorry, we don't have that information here at the table. I caution myself making assumptions, but one would assume that there would've needed to be correspondence and engagement with that funding envelope around how many young people could be part of that program, perhaps?

Ms ROSOL - I understand that you weren't the minister at the time, so it's difficult for you to have that information if you haven't been briefed on it. I note that you've been able to seek information for questions for other people at the table today to get that information back. Is it possible that you could do that in relation to these questions, or take them on notice?

Ms PALMER - I will seek some advice, and I will get back to you on that. I think the issue is that you're asking questions of the minister who wasn't here, a secretary who wasn't here and a deputy secretary who wasn't here. That's just a different level of complexity.

Ms ROSOL - Hopefully there's some knowledge somewhere.

Ms PALMER - We will see what information we can get for you. Chair, we are not taking that on notice. That is information we will provide before the end of the session.

PUBLIC

Ms ROSOL - A question coming forward in time, and perhaps there's someone at the table who was working in this area at the time. When the funding agreement was signed on 3 February 2025, had the department conducted any site visits, inspections and/or audits of JCP operations at that time?

Ms PALMER - I will have to refer back to the department.

I will hand that question to our deputy secretary.

Mr WHITCOMBE - I wanted to go back to your earlier question about the contract and make sure we understand specifically what that question is. I believe it is a normal part of communication to be working with an organisation around the funding commitment, the stretch of that resource and how far that will go for children and young people who are involved in that service. Then, building up what the contract needs to look like and what expectations around that contract need to look like. It's a normal backwards-and-forwards correspondence process. Then there are checks and balances around the contract that ultimately lands in terms of approval processes through me and the secretary and the procurement committee. There needs to be the ability to have those conversations and communications.

Ms ROSOL - I guess my question goes to the timing of it, because it seems that the \$3.7 million was committed before any of those conversations had happened, before any of the working out what would be offered and how much it might cost and what would be needed. So, the questions are around the timing.

Ms PALMER - What would be best is - I'm going to seek some advice around this. It was an election commitment - which we see across the board, be it from government, opposition, different parties involved - but I'm just going to seek some clarification so that I can come back to you with an answer.

Ms ROSOL - Thank you, minister.

Ms JOHNSTON - Minister, can I go to the Office of the Independent Regulator? Notifications are rising, and the Office of the Independent Regulator is providing written feedback and is prioritising high-risk sectors. They've had to introduce a risk-based triaging process to deal with the number of inquiries that they've had. Given the volume of requests for guidance and written review, does the government need to expand the office's staffing allocation?

Ms PALMER - I think the problem is the Office of the Independent Regulator sits under Justice. I don't think it sits under me as Children and Youth.

Ms JOHNSTON - Certainly some of the activities that they've been inquiring into sit within you. Is that correct?

Ms PALMER - I would assume, yes.

Ms JOHNSTON - Would you be concerned if they were unable to have enough staff to triage the written requests for guidance?

PUBLIC

Ms PALMER - We obviously want to see good outcomes with the work that they need to do, but I'm hesitant to talk about something that doesn't sit in this portfolio. I think those questions need to be put to the Justice minister.

Ms JOHNSTON - I'll put those resource questions to the Justice minister. More broadly speaking, the Office of the Independent Regulator started its assessment and monitoring program early and focused on custodial youth justice, due to concerning patterns. They've said, 'We changed course after becoming increasingly concerned about the existence and maintenance of child-safe practices in Tasmania's custodial youth justice sector.'

Minister, in what universe can a facility where nearly half the children are subject to reportable conduct be described as safe?

Ms PALMER - I'll ask the secretary for comments on that question.

Ms WEBSTER - Through you, minister. We're talking about the number of notifications made to the Office of the Independent Regulator. It gives me an opportunity to say that the majority of those notifications relate to historical matters. We're required to notify the Independent Regulator regarding any concern notice. Almost half of all the notifications arise from civil litigation or National Redress Scheme processes, not contemporary events at Ashley. Contemporary notifications are comparatively low and relate to a small number of workers. A total of 38 notifications relate to the 2024-2025 reporting period. The majority arise from operational incidents.

In a custodial environment, physical force can be required as an absolute last resort to maintain safety, and these notifications reflect the accountability mechanisms that we have in place, not ongoing evidence of abuse. Of the 23 matters closed with the Independent Regulator, one matter was substantiated.

I want to be really clear that the majority are in relation to historical matters arising from national redress or civil litigation. That is not to say that - I'm obviously obliged to investigate under the departmental ED5 code of conduct, but also under the Reportable Conduct Scheme, if there is any allegation of child abuse - and I'm using that very broad term.

'Use of force' could be something that is moving someone, pulling them away from a dangerous situation, or it could mean that there are challenging behaviours and there is a restraint involved. All those matters are reported to the Independent Regulator, all those matters form a concern notice, and then we investigate as to whether or not that use of force, for example, was justifiable use of force.

In a custodial environment, we would like zero use of force. That is the aim - but from time to time, the nature of the environment requires it. I want to be really clear, because there has been commentary around ongoing abuse at Ashley, and that is simply not what we have seen. I want to be very clear about that.

Mr SHELTON - My next question - we're all driving down the highway and as a northerner, minister, you come down the highway a lot. There's a sign up on the other side of Brighton to say this is the new area for the replacement of Ashley, for the youth justice facility. Can you update the committee on the progress to deliver this new youth justice facility, please?

PUBLIC

Ms PALMER - The Youth Justice Blueprint 2024-34 and the commission of inquiry recommendations provide a very clear pathway to achieve successful youth justice reform across Tasmania. It is an ambitious reform, but I'm very proud to now be the minister for Children and Youth and being responsible for leading this important and much needed reform agenda. It has never been more important to deliver a youth justice system that is therapeutic, that is addressing youth offending behaviours at its core.

A key part of this commitment is delivery of the new youth justice facility in southern Tasmania, at Pontville. To deliver on this commitment, a total of \$155.3 million is allocated to building the new youth justice facility in the south of the state at Pontville. The vision for the new facility is to enable an environment where children and young people experience the highest standard of child-centred, rights-based therapeutic care and education services and opportunities that will support them to enhance connections, to return to our communities and remain in them successfully.

The new facility at Pontville will be very much home-like in its design. It will be smaller than the current Ashley facility. A model of care is being developed, which will also incorporate access to critical services, such as health, education and vocational training, and to families and members of the community.

Until the new youth justice facility is operational, we are focused on enhancing safety and oversight and ensuring that Ashley has a full complement of staff, delivering a therapeutic model of care. We're committed to building a youth justice system that diverts children and young people away from offending and risk-taking behaviours. We want them out of detention and, if they've been in detention, we don't want them to be re-entering. Work is well under way to deliver on this commitment - and important to deliver a contemporary fit-for-purpose facility that aligns to the youth justice blueprint principles and supports that therapeutic care approach. I want children and young people who interact with the youth justice system to become the best versions of themselves, and I want our Tasmanian communities also to remain safe.

The master plan was released in May this year and we certainly listened to the feedback from the community consultation process and we continue to listen to community feedback so we can deliver a contemporary facility that is sympathetic to the surrounding environment.

In August 2025, the development application was submitted to the Southern Midlands Council. That's for assessment. Starting from 17 November, the council is now seeking community submissions and that's such a positive step in the direction we want to be going, in actually delivering on this commitment. Landscaping around the perimeter of the site is occurring now, so that it's well established before the facility opens. Together with providing site access and underground services prior to the start of the building - that preparation work is under way.

This activity absolutely shows that we are committed to closing Ashley Youth Detention Centre as soon as possible, and we will be delivering on developing a new facility that is based on therapeutic, rights-based - and that real child model of care. So much is happening in that space, and I thank you very much for the question.

Chair, I have answers to questions from Mrs Greene.

CHAIR - Sure.

PUBLIC

Ms PALMER - This is in regard to Bringing Baby Home. Your question was about the physical houses that we have. I'm advised that, at present, we have one in the north, one in the south, and none in the north-west. I will reiterate what the deputy secretary said, that this isn't a program where bringing baby home only goes to a different established facility. This is also about having that wraparound support and that intensive support for three months and it could be in that family's home as well.

Mrs GREENE - Going back to advice and referral lines, stakeholders continue to report that the ARL has been required to become everything to everyone because its scope is too broad and poorly defined. When priorities aren't clear and boundaries aren't visible, workloads rise and there's duplication, administrative handling increases and high-risk children could become lost in the queue. Could you outline what specific goals and priorities govern ARL work and how staff are supported to triage and prioritise based on risk?

Ms PALMER - Thank you very much for that question. I'll offer it to the deputy secretary.

Mr WHITCPMBE - Thank you and through you, minister. I think tabling the review and report recommendations will be helpful in responding to many of those questions. I think your reflections would be reflections that are borne out in the review as well in terms of the scale of - I think the words you used were - all things to all people and it.

Ultimately, the ARL has two core functions. There are some other smaller functions, but the two core functions are - in the first instance, is this an issue of potential abuse or harm? If so, there's some quick gathering of information that needs to go through to the child safety service in a very timely way. The second core function of the advice and referral line is to bridge supports and, ultimately, wherever possible, we don't want families to have to engage with the child safety service. So, there's some brokerage and support for families to move to that.

We are currently working with Prof Leah Bromfield and her team to establish what we're referring to as a charter for the ARL, which much more strongly defines its scope and its purpose. We're actively working on policy and guidance for our staff. Myself and the executive director beside me, over the last couple of weeks have been circulating around our state and meeting with ARL staff in particular, to really help them understand where we're going in terms of the advice and referral line, what that means for the child safety service, and what we're doing to help bring clarity to their role and to their work.

Mrs GREENE - Thank you very much. You talk about that clarity. That's really good because I've been hearing that in the community a lot. When will that guidance be provided to the sector, and how will compliance on that be monitored?

Mr WHITCOMBE - Through you, minister. What we have done is essentially work through the recommendations of the review and its findings in two phases, and we're right at the end of phase one. We recognise that there is both more resources needed, and more work to do, to establish that policy and guidance. If the charter is becoming really clear about the scope and purpose, then we need to gather and organise our workforce in the right way around that.

PUBLIC

The course of this year, and again going back to the commission of inquiry, has seen the establishment of the Office of the Chief Practitioner and currently recruiting for the chief practitioner role in and of itself. In the background we have brought the office together and it's a mixture of practice, policy and guidance professionals, practice leadership, quality assurance, and learning and development. That is coming together under the guidance of that chief practitioner. It is that team that is assessing the critical needs in terms of updates to policy and guidance at the moment, and creating a forward plan for what is possible with the capacity that we have within that team.

I can't give you a specific timeline and I know you want that, but we are working in haste because the front door of our service and bridging to those supports is a critical function in our work.

Mrs GREENE - I agree. Thank you. I still have one question left.

Disability liaison officers, I believe there was meant to be five within ARL, but I have been hearing that those numbers have been reduced to potentially two or three staff. Can I confirm is that due to vacancies or is it a permanent reduction down to two or three FTE?

Ms PALMER - I am being advised that perhaps Jason might be the best person to answer that. While that's happening, and to give Jason a moment to find some notes, Chair, with your indulgence, I have the Strong Family Safe Kid advice and referral line review project to table.

CHAIR - Thank you, minister.

Mr SOWELL - Through you, minister. The state Budget in 2025-26 did provide funding to support three FTE disability liaison officers. Through the recent period, I can name up that they were recruited to all those roles. I would have to check to ensure they are currently filled, but there was absolutely no intent to change the number of those roles. In fact, they are a really important role and we will continue to support that function.

Ms ROSOL - Chair, before I begin my next round of questions, the question that I asked in the previous round wasn't answered. There was no attempt to answer it. That was, if at the time of the funding agreement being signed on 3 February, the department had conducted any site visits, inspections or audits of JCP operations. If I could get an answer to that before moving on to my questions for this round, please?

Ms PALMER - Thank you. I will refer that question to the deputy secretary.

Mr WHITCOMBE - Through you, minister, and I apologise for not responding earlier. Again, I don't have a perfect answer, but I have met with the JCP team, the leadership, and that was prior to the contract being signed. In addition, Tiffany Black, the executive director, has spent some time shadowing the service and observing directly what occurs in practice on a day-to-day level.

Ms ROSOL - You met with them before the signing? Not an inspection or site visit, so much as a meeting with them before it was signed?

Mr WHITCOMBE - It was meeting with leadership and staff within the service.

PUBLIC

Ms ROSOL - And the executive director has been out and done it now. Thank you.

Ms PALMER - Through you, Chair. I have an answer to a question from Ms Rosol that I committed to get back to her on. This is on the same topic around the funding to JCP. So, the commitment was made at the 2024 election to invest \$3.7 million in JCP Youth over three years to support at-risk Tasmanians. It was a commitment that was made at the election under caretaker provisions and did not involve the department. The decision was made to invest in this initiative to divert and prevent young people from offending.

Ms ROSOL - Thank you. Just a question: RTI documents that the Greens obtained show that, in early 2024, DECYP created a referral pathway for children on care and protection orders to JCP and emails from department staff said there would be an arrangement that would see up to five young people on these orders in the north-west being supported by JCP. Can you explain how that arrangement works, and is JCP effectively replacing the support that would otherwise be provided directly through the department?

Ms PALMER - I will hand that question to the deputy secretary.

Mr WHITCOMBE - Through you, minister. I am familiar - in terms of the capacity, both of JCP as a service and in terms of its footprint in the north-west, north and south. We have worked to a particular volume or number of children and young people who we're working with. At times that volume has exceeded what's within the contract. Where there's been specific needs for specific children and young people, we've still utilised a fee-for-service basis.

In terms of the referral process, we have a moderation panel that comes together and meets. It's a mixture of our practice staff leadership and JCP staff. That's about making sure that there's a good fit in terms of the service and, secondly, that we are working with the children who need it most.

What I would say in terms of their service, in their logo, it's a jigsaw piece, and it talks to their service being one part of a jigsaw and that they work alongside, whether it be Health or Education or Child Safety and Youth Justice, or other professionals in the sector, they are part of a team-based approach to the care. It would never mean that there's a withdrawal of services if they're needed from a Child Safety or Youth Justice perspective, but we would work with them and do work with them in a team-based approach.

Ms ROSOL - I suppose my question gets to whether JCP is being used as a replacement for understaffing within the department. What triggered the decision to approve JCP as a service provider and referral pathway for children and young people? Was it a huge lack of child safety officers in the north-west that were a factor in that?

Mr WHITCOMBE - Through you, minister, no.

Prof RAZAY - To change tack here. We all recognise the rise in mental health disorders from an anxiety to ADHD, depression, autism, and we know the impact of that on their learning, on their social behaviour, on their offending as well. These are quite important, and they're growing.

The amount of time children spend on social media and gaming is growing and digital technology has become part of life of many children of all ages, even infants. This raises

important questions for parents regarding whether children and youth are spending enough time outdoors and whether children and young people prioritise screen time over outdoors, which is detrimental to their overall physical and mental wellbeing.

What initiatives are available to address digital addiction in children and young people? How is the government tackling the issue of children spending increasing amount of time in front of screens instead of playing outdoors?

Ms PALMER - There's probably two parts to answer your question. One part I will refer to the secretary around what we try to do to give different opportunities to young people. But this is probably the reason that we've seen the action from the federal government around what they are calling the delay of social media access for children under the age of 16. This is a federal government initiative.

The secretary and I at the last education ministers' meeting that we attended were involved in a presentation around this. It was quite horrifying to hear about some of the impacts of social media on our young people. For me, as a mum, I hate phones. I love it when I can hide them from my children. Probably, to be fair, they actually hide my phone from me at times as well, if I'm completely honest.

That has been a massive thing, and there are many other countries around the world that are watching what Australia does. That's also quite complex because I'm totally in agreement with really restricting access to social media for children under 16. But we also have to ensure there's a whole generation of children who've grown up, and that this is their communication space. We're actually taking away something from them which I think is really great. However, we do have to make sure that we are putting supports in place, to offer them other ways of communicating with each other.

I'm tempted to share with you some stories about my children and their reaction to this, but I'm not going to. They're having to learn how to talk on a phone as opposed to communicating over different ways. That has been something that the federal government has done and we're supportive of that. We're certainly trying to roll out information now to families and to young people about what will be off-limits to them and putting the responsibility back onto those big companies that have huge profits at the expense of our children. I will see if the secretary has any more to add?

Ms WEBSTER - Thank you. Particularly in this space where we have vulnerable children and families, it's important to have a balance. I think there's a lot to unpack in your questions. First, providing opportunities for children and young people who are in care, who are in detention, or on the cusp of those things, with opportunities and families with opportunities, outdoor activities, that they wouldn't normally get to do is a really important part of building their future.

Some of the things that we are doing around banning mobile phones in schools, for example, is to allow them to focus on learning. Mobile phones and social media can sometimes be a really important connection for kids in care, vulnerable kids, or kids who might be subject to family violence. It's a really interesting space and it's a balancing act. It could also be a way for those kids to keep in contact with their caseworker, for example, when they're older. It's really interesting.

When we look at youth diversion and providing opportunities that are just not indoor screen-based opportunities: what are the opportunities for kids to get out into the open? I know that in many other countries they do this. They have a very strong connection to outdoor activities. That's the sort of model that we're trying to build with the youth justice framework and the diversion. The challenge that we have in Tasmania - and having been in this space in a previous life - I know that the service capacity is limited. We've got to build that capacity. We have to make sure that the organisations have the people and that we're working with them and we're co-designing some of those things with our children and young people because I'm of a certain age that might have a very different idea of what might be cool than one of our young people. I think there's a real opportunity here for some co-design for some of these projects and some of the policies.

Prof RAZAY - I would like to add just one word - the best word that I promoted for old as well as young is to foster 'connectedness.' That's what we need to promote.

Ms JOHNSTON - Thank you. Minister, 15 community service organisations, groups, and peak bodies only a few weeks ago released a statement called *From harm to healing: a community services joint statement on the proposed Pontville Youth Justice Facility*. The organisations were:

- Anglicare Tasmania
- Engender Equality
- Jordan River Services Incorporated
- Australian Lawyers Alliance
- Laurel House
- Tasmanian Aboriginal Legal Service
- Women's Legal Service Tasmania
- The Tasmanian Optional Protocol to Convention Against Torture and Cruel, Inhumane and Degrading Treatment Network
- Tasmanian Family and Sexual Violence Alliance
- Women's Health Tasmania
- Youth Network of Tasmania
- Grassroots Action Network of Tasmania
- Yemaya Women's Support Services
- Prisoners Legal Services
- Knightlamp

These services expressed in their statement significant concerns about the Tasmanian government's proposed Pontville Youth Justice Facility. The signatories argued that the facility represents a missed opportunity for genuine youth justice reform and fails to uphold the government's commitment to implementation of recommendations of the commission of inquiry. They also state that the facility, as currently planned, poses a violation of the government's duty of care, commitment to child safety, and obligations under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Have you had an opportunity to read through the joint statement from those organisations and how would you address their concerns?

PUBLIC

Ms PALMER - I have had an opportunity to read through that and we are absolutely committed to developing a youth justice system that is achieving better outcomes for young people and their families. This decision to build a new justice facility aligns with the recommendations from the commission of inquiry and it also aligns with the Youth Justice Blueprint. It does form part of a broader reform program to improve youth justice outcomes across Tasmania. This vision that we have for this new facility is to enable an environment where children and young people are experiencing that highest standard that I ran through before with a question that came earlier: around it being child centred, about it being rights based, about the therapeutic care, the educational services, the opportunities that can come so that we can be really supporting these young people to enhance their connections and return and then remain successfully in the community.

I would love to be able to sit here and say Tasmania doesn't need a youth justice facility, but that's not the reality. This is not the be all and end all. This is the last resort when we've tried everything else. This is the last resort.

I appreciate the comments and the letter that came. I'm sorry that I don't have it with me at the moment, but there was also a response to this letter from Mr Robert Benjamin. He made a public statement in response to the Laurel House community-based joint statement. He was quite clear in stating that he supported the right for the signatories to express their views, but some recommendations were simply not consistent with the recommendations that we have in the commission of inquiry. Mr Benjamin went on to state that he cannot support the immediate closure of the Ashley Youth Detention Centre without an alternative which provides for the safety of the community and the safety of the young person, all supported by the appropriate care arrangements together with broader bail facilities and improved community-based services.

Mr Benjamin outlined in the statement that he does not support the rejection and the proposed review of the new facility at Pontville. He was actively involved in overseeing the planning of the facility when he was the chair of the independent expert panel, prior to his appointment to the child safety implementation monitor role. That expert panel considered the site that was selected by government after examination of many other sites. Mr Benjamin, who is our child safety implementation monitor, his statement includes that the rejection of the proposed new youth justice facility is likely to prove to be a repudiation of a number of recommendations that are designed to promote the creation of that home-like therapeutic and trauma-informed centre, which is what we know that these young people knew.

It's very powerful when you have the child safety implementation monitor who has been involved through this process for quite some time, really at the heart of the recommendations from the commission of inquiry, holding the government now to account around the commission of inquiry recommendations which we're committed to do. Again, I very much appreciate the letter that was sent.

Yes, I have certainly read through that. I haven't just read through it. I've looked at it, and I've really thought about it, but this is the direction that we have committed to. This is based on the recommendations of the commission of inquiry. This is also formed with the work that we've done with the Youth Justice Blueprint.

Ms JOHNSTON - Will you meet with representatives of this group?

PUBLIC

CHAIR - Sorry, Ms Johnston, with the time we have, we have to through as many questions as we can. We'll come back.

Mr SHELTON - Minister, can you update the committee on how the government ensures, given that we're talking about vulnerable children and that sort of thing, that immediate support is always available to children and young people experiencing crisis?

Ms PALMER - Thank you very much for the question. A core focus for the Tasmanian Government in this Budget is to improve the structures and processes in out of home care, to identify and respond proactively to the needs and the voices of children and young people when it is needed. That's why this government has provided funding of \$1.8 million over two years to develop a new extended statewide after hours service: \$770,000 is allocated in 2026-27 and there is \$1 million in 2027-28. This funding will provide for eight FTE to facilitate a new after hours service. The new model will build on the child safety services current emergency only after hours capability and will increase and improve responses by providing best practise and supportive responses to support children and young people outside of business hours.

The current after hours emergency service responds to matters identified as an emergency or a high priority that are unable to be held over until the next working day. The service is currently staffed through a roster of child safety service staff who perform after hours emergency service work and it's in addition to their day-to-day role. This results, or this can result, in fatigue and other health and safety risks, including issues around the consistency of service to children and young people.

In addition to the increased services for children and their families, the new model will support business hours staff to attend to plan tasks such as child visits and care team meetings, instead of responding to events that could have come up from the night before.

The new after hours service is designed to provide children-centred responses and that's including practical support, problem solving and more complex responses to high risk events such as mental health crises, medical events or placement breakdowns. Also responding to assisting carers to work through relational and other challenges within a household alongside the children and young people that they are indeed caring for.

Exercising statutory responsibilities by assessing concerns about the safety of any child or young person in the community, assessing the risk and taking appropriate actions to build safety and also working with our partners who provide specialist programs to infants, high risk families and children and young people returning to their families to resolve issues arising outside of business hours.

The service design draws on extensive consultation with children and young people. Consultation with carers, with staff, with unions and other stakeholders.

The new after hours model was due to commence in July of this year. However, there has been a delay due to industrial award negotiations in relation to the proposed rostering model. All questions and concerns raised during the consultation have been addressed and unions were supportive of the new service, noting the benefits for the health and well-being of the staff that are currently participating in that existing model.

PUBLIC

We are committed to continuing working with all partners on a revised rostering rules agreement to allow for a rotational roster and we anticipate that that will commence in 2026.

Mrs GREENE - The safety and well-being of ARL and child safety staff is very important. I have a few questions around their accommodation. Now that there has been some roles filled in Devonport, they're bursting at the seams. Launceston offices are like a rabbit warren, and probably also not fit for purpose anymore. The advice and referral line is split between two buildings which isn't ideal. Are there plans to relocate or improve accommodation options for these groups of workers?

Ms PALMER - I've visited those facilities and the one in Launceston is a very old building, a beautiful building. As you say, it is quite the rabbit warren, isn't it? But for more operational details, I'll refer to the department.

Ms WEBSTER - Generally, before I ask if the deputy secretary would like to comment specifically. As a department, we have an overarching infrastructure plan around how we're going to address the various needs of the organisation. Certainly, we've been discussing the Child Safety Service accommodation more broadly, and youth justice staff accommodated in there also. St John's Park eventually will have a new mental health facility out there. We're talking to Department of Health about what that means for us and where we might be able to be accommodated. It is part of our planning process.

We're always looking at ways we can co-locate those services because you get good water cooler discussion and opportunities to talk to people. It doesn't matter what level you're at. It's a great opportunity, so it's certainly part of our overall planning. I can't give you the exact detail of how that all fits together because we're a large department and relying on working through some of those areas that are most urgent. It is one of our areas that we know is most urgent and is definitely part of our consideration and planning moving forward.

Mrs GREENE - You've touched on St John's Park there, but not the north or north-west accommodation.

Ms WEBSTER - That was part of that. I visited all those and know the north well. I worked in that office a bit many years ago. Believe it or not that has had a quite significant upgrade from what it was. That doesn't say that we're happy with that. We want to improve our accommodation options for our staff. It does go to those staff being valued and making sure that they have the best accommodation we can put them in. That is all part of that planning.

Mr WHITCOMBE - In terms of the north-west, there is currently active work between our property team and both our child safety, youth justice and education staff and the Burnie area. There are some new plans afoot and we're working in a collaborative way to make sure that everybody's needs can be met through that.

Mrs GREENE - Circling right back from the start, Tradewind, can you advise what was the total contract value for that quality of work that went to Tradewind and how would it have compared with the cost of directly employing Tasmanian child safety officers? Was there an audit of the quality of the work completed by Tradewind?

Ms PALMER - I'm able to provide some information and I might need to go to the department for the other. I'm advised that the cost of that was \$850,000.

PUBLIC

Mr WHITCOMBE - That outsourcing approach wasn't done in isolation of our practice staff here on the ground. First, they went through an induction and training approach and there was assurance on the qualifications and background of the people that we were working with through Tradewind in terms of their appropriate expertise in this work. I want to say that in no different way, it was our practice managers within the service who were signing off on the decisions and the work that were made through the Tradewind staff and it was a very much a partnered collaborative approach to that. In terms of our assurance, we were following a normal process of decision making through utilising that partnered way of working.

Ms ROSOL - Our RTI documents show that in the discussion about JCP Youth as a referral pathway, the Director of Children and Families from DECYP stated that and I quote, 'JCP can't safely support females yet'. Why was it determined that JCP Youth couldn't safely support females, and as of now, does the department have any current concerns about JCP's ability to provide a safe program for female participants?

Ms PALMER - Their service is not for female participants. Their service is for young males aged between 11 and 17.

Mr WHITCOMBE - I know that there is work under way to be able to see their service expanded to support young women. If we were to look at the the data in Ashley Youth Detention Centre, for example, we've seen a lift in numbers of young women in that offending area. We know there is a real need. There will be issues in having the appropriate gender-based workforce in place for them to be able to provide the appropriate service.

Ms ROSOL - Is that the only issue in terms of gender?

Mr WHITCOMBE - I'm not aware of any other issues on that front.

Ms ROSOL - In minutes from the May 2024 Community Youth Justice meeting, staff raised a whole range of concerns about JCP youth. They included concerns and all these are quotes.

- JCP requesting a photo of a young person in a referral
- JCP buying gifts for children
- discouraging participation in other programs and activities including school lack of understanding of trauma informed practices
- perpetuating hypermasculine gender ideals,
- camps that purport to break down a young person,
- reports of JCP not following through for cases that proved too hard to manage which can harm a young person and leave them without support.

Those were all concerns that were raised in a community youth justice meeting. What's been done in response to those concerns, minister. Since May 2024 have department staff raised any further concerns about JCP Youth's operations? Are any of these issues outstanding?

Ms PALMER - To the second part of your question, I will refer that to the secretary in a moment with regard to any outstanding matters.

What I can tell you is that the department is working with JCP Youth to ensure it's supported to meet all the requirements of its funding agreement over the next three years while continuing to grow as an organisation. This includes ensuring that JCP Youth continues to operate within a child safe framework with all workers and volunteers appropriately cleared through working with vulnerable people, registration and police checks in line with ongoing requirements for engaging with young people.

The JCP Youth Funding Agreement includes the standard Tasmanian government contract requirements as well as detailed measures of program success, reporting requirements and outcome measures to ensure that JCP Youth based actively contributes to diverting at risk young people from the youth justice system.

As part of its contract, JCP Youth must escalate all reportable incidents and where necessary, incidents will be investigated thoroughly through Tasmania Police and the Office of the Independent Regulator.

Ms ROSOL - If I could follow up there because you've mentioned them having working with vulnerable people cards and having to report conduct. Are you aware of any concerns about JCP Youth staff engaging in reportable conduct? Have any JCP Youth staff or volunteers had their working with vulnerable people registration suspended?

Ms PALMER - I will refer that part of that question and the other part of your other question to the secretary.

Ms WEBSTER - If it was our staff, I'm not going to comment on individual matters and that is a matter for the individual organisation, whether it be JCP Youth or another organisation that we work with. What I can say in all cases, there would be any complaint about an organisation or a member of an organisation working with our young people we would be required to do a concern notice as an entity that, and I have I think 48 hours or 72 hours I think it is, on that basis to report that. That would be my requirement to do that. The organisation as we do with our staff would be required to investigate that person and then that is overseen by the Office of the Independent Regulator.

Ms ROSOL - Can I clarify; you're saying that you can't comment here today on whether any of that has happened with JCP Youth?

Ms WEBSTER - I'm not going to comment on individual matters, no.

Ms ROSOL - Sorry, there was another bit of the question the minister was going to refer.

Ms PALMER - Can you just read it, was the second half of your question -

Ms ROSOL - Since May 24, have the department staff raised any further concerns about JCP Youth's operations or any of these issues outstanding?

Mr WHITCOMBE - I am not aware of further concerns and alongside those matters that you raise, I think it's appropriate in terms of our staff and their staff coming together and talking about the issues that they might be worried about. Sometimes it's about addressing and learning as an organisation and as a system. Sometimes it's also about myth busting those things that might be assumptions in that space around what is happening.

PUBLIC

Ms ROSOL - Are you suggesting these are myths about JCP, some of these things?

Mr WHITCOMBE - I'm suggesting that it's really important to get to the bottom of whatever the issue is and things are, with many situations, not always as it seems. You've raised questions about photos and social media -

Ms ROSOL - I'm actually quoting from minutes from a meeting.

Ms PALMER - Through you Chair. If the deputy secretary could finish his answer, please.

CHAIR - Please, Ms Rosol.

Mr WHITCOMBE - I have assurance that the staff at JCP on a four-weekly basis have a day's worth of training. Part of that training is through external organisations around trauma-informed care. I have had direct conversations with JCP about data and about consent in terms of photos, and have assurance on those fronts that appropriate consents are sought and that data is captured in safe and secure ways for young people within the JCP service.

CHAIR - I remind members to please direct all questions to the minister and through the minister. Ms Johnston.

Ms JOHNSTON - Thank you, Chair. Minister, going back to November 2022, there was an expectation that there would be five smaller regional home-like facilities for young people. We've now jumped forward to now we have one at Pontville. That's probably one of the reasons why I suppose these 15 community organisations and peak bodies have come together to express their concern. You said before that you've read through their statement and pointed to Mr Benjamin's response to that statement. But do you appreciate that they do have very genuine concerns regarding design and operational concerns with Pontville? Do you commit to meeting with them to go through in detail?

These are organisations that work at the coalface. They work directly one on one with young people, in particular. There are also bodies in here that are very academic, they understand jurisdictional differences across international landscapes in terms of other options that we do have, they have a significant evidence base, a significant experience base.

Do you commit to meeting with them to understand their concerns about Pontville, in particular around the design and operational parts of Pontville?

Ms PALMER - I'm going to ask the deputy secretary to speak to the design of this new facility, which is quite extraordinary, and goes a long way to addressing some -

Ms JOHNSTON - I'm really conscious of the time and I know that other people have questions. I have had a briefing on the design. I'm asking you, minister, about whether you commit to meeting with these organisations to hear directly from them, who are experienced, have a significant evidence base to understand why they are concerned about the design and operational aspects of Pontville. I've had a briefing, but I would like for you to be able to meet with them directly. Is that something you're willing to do?

PUBLIC

Ms PALMER - Yes, I mean, I will meet with anyone anytime. I have no issues with meeting with them. I've met with the majority of them already, not specifically about that letter, but I engage with them as stakeholders on quite a regular basis. There's no issue at all with speaking to them. I will go to the deputy secretary just for further comment.

Mr WHITCOMBE - Yes. I wanted to provide assurance that that open offer has been made, and actually quite some time ago, in terms of the concerns that are being raised. I know that members of my team have been meeting with organisations that were signatories to the letter as recently as this week. Those conversations are constructive in terms of the principles around rights-focused and therapeutic care.

As we work through what does the day-to-day care look like for a child within the facility, what are all of the moving parts of that, we absolutely are committed to working with all the people who have a vested interest in seeing this be the absolute best facility that it can be for children and young people. We will continue to work with those parties.

Mr SHELTON - Thank you, Chair. I have talked up the benefits of being a grandparent, but one of the issues is it does come with a certain vintage. You need to be a certain vintage before you get to that point, so excuse me for standing for a while.

My question is for the minister to update the committee on how the functions of the child and youth empowerment office is supporting children and young people in out-of-home care.

Ms PALMER - Thank you very much. We don't mind that you are standing up at all, Mr Shelton.

We know that actively involving children and young people in decision-making processes on issues that affect them leads to better outcomes. In August 2024, a director of child and youth empowerment was appointed and the child and youth empowerment team was established, and this was built from the systemic advocacy function of the Child Advocate.

This government committed funding of \$1.6 million over four years through the 2024-25 state Budget for child and youth empowerment, in line with the commission of inquiry recommendations that the department develop a participation and empowerment strategy for children and young people in out-of-home care, and that's recommendation 6.9, and also, the strategy for children and young people in detention, which was recommendation 12.8.

The child and youth empowerment team is leading work to develop and implement DECYP's participation and empowerment strategy. The strategy supports embedding DECYP's organisational belief that children's rights are upheld in all that we do. It aims to increase the diversity of voices and depth of influence of children and young people involved in child safety and youth justice services and/or who identify as being Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, or as having a disability.

The participation and empowerment strategy will document and build on existing work and also include the development of an overarching and comprehensive guide that outlines best-practice principles, ethics and models for children and young people's participation at individual and systemic levels, a rights of the child educational campaign that builds awareness and understanding of children's rights, as outlined in the United Nations Convention on the

PUBLIC

Rights of the Child, a lived-experience advisory model to establish advisory groups that include out-of-home care, youth justice, students, parents and carers.

Work will be developed in parallel using the same consultation and opt-in co-design process with children, young people and our community. The Child Advocate for out-of-home care continues to see increased demand for their support from children and young people statewide. More children and young people are engaging with this critical support, ensuring that they have another opportunity to connect with safe, supportive adults in their life who are able to hear their voices.

In the future, individual advocacy for children and young people in out-of-home care will move to the Commissioner for Children and Young People. This is in response to commission of inquiry recommendation 9.33 and the need for the service to be independent from the department. The online Youth Voice survey was implemented as a trial from April to November of 2024, and the trial survey tool was designed for young people aged 12 to 17 in care to share their views directly with the care team and the care planning processes. I'm very grateful for the team's incredible work and certainly for the difference that they are making to so many children and young people who spend their time in out-of-home care.

Mrs GREENE - Thank you. I'm just looking at some of the data available on the dashboard around cases pending a child safety assessment, and note that there was a bit of a spike in December of last year where the daily average cases peaked at 48.4. What caused the spike in those pending assessments? Were there any priority 1 cases that breached their timeframes? It is my understanding if there's a P1 or a P2 that there are certain timeframes. Can you talk through that, please, minister?

Ms PALMER - Yes, I will pass that to the deputy secretary and while he is gathering his thoughts, Chair, could I please make a correction?

CHAIR - Sure.

Ms PALMER - This is for Ms Greene, when you asked about the amount that was spent on Tradewind. My understanding is that the contract was for \$850,000, which I said, but I want to tell you that the actual spend was \$811,509, and that was with GST. The first figure I gave you was the contract. The second figure I've given you is the actual spend.

I will now pass to the deputy secretary.

Mr WHITCOMBE - Can I clarify the date that you referenced?

Mrs GREENE - Yes, the quarter ending December 2024, so the plot's directly from the DECYP website saying daily average cases was 48.4, which compared to the quarter before that was 25.9, so that does seem like there was a bit of a spike.

Mr WHITCOMBE - Yes. What I would say is that child safety referrals and matters coming to the ARL don't follow a smooth pattern of contact. Often, towards the end of the year, in terms of child safety matters in particular, there's increasing worries about the period of time over school holidays and we typically do see a rise in matters being referred through to child safety service at that time. I would also say that those numbers do fluctuate regularly. As of

PUBLIC

our data right now, we have an average of 37 cases, which is a reduction from the number that you quoted. Thank you.

Mrs GREENE - Thank you. The part of that question that wasn't answered there was around whether there any breaches of timeframes of getting to young people who were classified as priority 1 or priority 2?

Ms PALMER - I will seek some advice around that.

Mrs GREENE - If you need to take it on notice, that's okay.

Mr WHITCOMBE - We would need to see what we can provide in the here and now in terms of the data and consistency in terms of the timeframes that you're requesting. We will see if we can provide that.

Ms PALMER - We will try to get that to you before the end of the session.

Mrs GREENE - Thank you. While you're looking through data then, I have another data question around restoration, which is certainly the goal. We want children back with their families if it's safe and in their best interest to do so. Can you advise if there are any targets that exist for a safe and timely restoration? How many children have been in care for more than two years without any progress toward restoration or guardianship?

Ms PALMER - I will seek some advice on that question and check what information we have with us at the table.

I will refer to the deputy secretary.

Mr WHITCOMBE - I can answer part of the question. We do not have a target in terms of an overarching number or KPI around this. However, I think with our practitioners planning with children who are in care, having a care goal that is really clear, that the team is working towards is of critical importance. For most children, we want to see them safely reunified, restored within their family. If they can't be there, know where they're going to be in terms of a part of a family in the long term and have that stability.

We have recognised that we need to do more work within our service to shore up practice and focus in this area and are currently establishing what we are calling localised care governance teams, which are monitoring the planning goals for the children in care for each of the regions and making sure that there's really strong visibility and oversight to ensure there isn't drift. I think the thing that you're concerned about is that there isn't drift for children who are in care.

Ms ROSOL - Minister, in 2024, the Rockliff government commissioned Dr Morag MacSween to develop a reform paper on child sexual abuse. Dr MacSween was a great choice by the government to do this work. She has decades of experience in the area and she's highly respected.

In a submission to the parliamentary inquiry on the recommendations of the COI, Dr MacSween raised a number of significant concerns about JCP Youth. She described a senior JCP figure as having, quote 'An alarming lack of understanding about appropriate professional

boundaries, particularly when working with highly vulnerable children.' Does this kind of commentary from an eminent independent expert concern you? Did the department raise this matter with JCP?

Ms PALMER - I think what I would need to say in response to that is that the services that JCP are supplying, that they have been funded to supply, we know they are working in a space where I don't think there are many others working. What we have done following on from the election commitment that was made is to be really tight around governance, around reporting, around supporting JCP to be really accountable back to the department.

I certainly accept and take on board those comments that you're referring to from Dr MacSween through the commission of inquiry process. However, we have worked closely with JCP and we know that the work that they are doing is really important in ensuring that we are engaging with young people before they get to a point where they are engaging with the youth justice system.

I accept the comments that you're making. However, I've looked at this with the department and looked at how we are supporting JCP in the work that they're doing. I will check if there's any more from the secretary.

Ms WEBSTER - Thank you, minister. In terms of the outcomes for some of the young people that are engaged through JCP Youth now, I want to say that for 16 of these 18 participants, we know internally that there's been a reduction in their offending. There has been no new offending since they commenced the program. Sixteen of the 18 participants have re-engaged, maintained or increased their educational attendance; 11 per cent of the participants have gained employment within the first three months of their engagement with the program; and all young people have shown positive engagement with JCP as a service provider.

JCP is actively supporting an independent evaluation process that is being overseen by the department and that will assess the BEAST program's outcomes in the lives of young people and value for money. This is part of our standard process. We make sure that we meet with JCP through Peter's area on a scheduled monthly basis as part of the governance of the contract. That is one part. We also need to make sure that we are working with them around the service provision and contract compliance and those sorts of things, but most importantly how they're interacting with those young people. They're a registered entity under the Child and Youth Safe Organisations Act. The deputy secretary and I met with the new chair of JCP Youth last week and made our expectations clear as I meet with lots of entities and more so the deputy secretary.

I want to be really clear that we are engaged with them. There have been early indications of some good outcomes with these young people. I think it's important to note that. It's important that we continue to monitor them, like any organisation, and we are actively undertaking independent evaluation.

Ms ROSOL - Thank you, minister and secretary. It is important to note those things. It's also important to note the concerns. Dr MacSween isn't the only person who has raised concerns. Human rights expert, Carolyn Frohmader, has also raised concerns. I've also heard from people working in the non-government sector, and from other people in the community who are concerned.

PUBLIC

You've talked about the importance of oversight. You've talked about governance and reporting. I wonder if you could provide us with an outline of the specific requirements that you have around governance and reporting, please.

Ms PALMER - In terms of -

Ms ROSOL - Well, you've said that you've increased -

Ms PALMER - the contract? Is that what you're referring to?

Ms ROSOL - Yes, you've said that you have met with them. You've said that you are requiring governance and reporting. Could you outline what that is? There are significant concerns in the community, and I think it would be useful to hear the specifics of what reporting needs to be done, what's being monitored, and how often it's being monitored.

Ms PALMER - Yes, for sure. I can make a start on that. The department meets with JCP on a scheduled monthly basis as part of the contract governance. These meetings are attended by key departmental staff to discuss the current service provision, risks and contract compliance. There's weekly operational oversight that also occurs, where the department is in contact with JCP personnel about individual young people in the program.

JCP Youth operates two safe houses - one in the north of the state and another one in the southern region. These safe houses are visited quarterly by the statewide youth practice manager, as part of operational engagement and oversight with JCP. These safe houses may also be accessed by Community Youth Justice staff for the purposes of engagement with young people while they are present at the safe house.

JCP provide quarterly reporting to the department on its obligations under the contract. One quarterly report has been provided since the commencement of the contract and the next report, I'm advised, is due to be provided at the end of 2025. The quarterly reporting schedule is aligned with the timeline of participant commencement with the BEAST program, and the quarterly reports for 2026 will likely be required in March, June, September and December, to align with a February 2026 intake.

JCP Youth utilises a comprehensive data management system and program, the department does not access this database, as it is internal to JCP Youth processes, but I'm advised that as part of the contract, JCP needs to be recording and feeding into that data management system.

I will check if there's anything else the secretary would like to add.

Ms WEBSTER - Through you, minister. The contract also includes, as the minister said, quarterly reporting on outcomes, annual reports throughout the agreement's duration, as well as those quarterly reports, program evaluation requirements, key performance indicators, compliance with the *Child and Youth Safe Organisations Act*, coordinated referral process, an alignment with key frameworks such as the Youth Justice model of care, the Youth Justice blueprint, the commission of inquiry recommendations, and the diversionary services framework.

PUBLIC

I also encourage, if people have specific complaints, they can go to the deputy secretary and me, and we will address those complaints. We do that with anything.

Ms ROSOL - Thank you. Can I just check - we've talked about the BEAST program. They offer other programs that are deeply concerning. Is there an expectation that all programs at JCP Youth should comply with child-safety principles?

Ms WEBSTER - Yes.

Ms ROSOL - Thanks.

Ms JOHNSTON - Thank you. I've got a question regarding the Child and Youth Safe Organisations Framework. When young people are accommodated in youth emergency shelters, the current funding model allows for only one worker overnight. Shelter Tasmania members have raised concerns that a one-worker model creates an environment that can be unsafe for both clients and workers, and that this model is not in line with the Child and Youth Safe Organisations Framework.

The level of risk associated with accommodating children and young people deserves extra attention, obviously, after the commission of inquiry, but also is noted in the Crawford Review, as an ongoing issue that needs to be addressed.

What plans and funding are in place to enable Youth Service to comply with Child and Youth Safe Organisations frameworks and new legislative requirements? What steps have Homes Tasmania - and I appreciate it's not your portfolio, but I'm hoping that you do some liaising with the other portfolios - commenced to ensure its services are adhering to the child safe organisations legislation? What is the cost impact of services for this new level of compliance?

I understand that it's across a number of portfolios, but we want to make sure that children are safe, when they are particularly vulnerable, in youth emergency accommodation, and there is a level of responsibility there, in your department.

Ms PALMER - The question really does sit with Homes Tasmania. Obviously, we take a great interest in ensuring that anywhere where our young people are that they are in safe environments. But yes, it does sit in the Homes Tasmania space.

Ms JOHNSTON - What advocacy are you providing to the Housing minister and to Homes Tasmania in relation to the need to be compliant with the framework? Certainly, when it comes to allocation of funding, this is a high priority for young people.

Ms PALMER - Yes, I'll refer to the secretary.

Ms WEBSTER - My understanding is that all government entities must comply with the Child and Youth Safe Organisations framework, or the act, and certainly under the Reportable Conduct Scheme Entities, and obviously we, comply. We would expect, in terms of the work that we do with any organisation, that they comply with the conditions of Reportable Conduct and the relevant legislation. My understanding is all government organisations must comply with that legislation.

PUBLIC

Ms JOHNSTON - This is an example of where there's non-compliance. I suppose my question is, what advocacy is done between departments? It seems to be that we ask the minister, it's a youth issue, it gets passed around. Yet we still have young people in highly vulnerable circumstances. What advocacy is being done at a greater level of governance to try to ensure that this is not the situation and there is not that unsafe situation?

Ms PALMER - I'll refer to the secretary.

Ms WEBSTER - Through you, minister. Certainly, from my level, these issues would be raised and Homes Tasmania and myself, deputy secretary, and operational officers do work together on these matters.

If there are particularly systemic issues or strategic issues, then they can be raised through the Secretaries Board or individually, and that does happen all the time. Organisations, particularly across government, ring each other all the time, if there's issues in particular.

I think that sometimes really great staff are working really hard within parameters, and often when things are escalated, we can stretch some of those parameters in a way that actually helps some of those staff be more flexible. I have seen numerous occasions where that happens. The Secretaries Board, we have a subcommittee of Secretaries Board, Keeping Children Safe, and those sorts of issues would be discussed around systemic barriers that we need to move to help those sorts of issues.

Ms JOHNSTON - These kinds of issues would be addressed at that level?

Ms WEBSTER - Yes. I can't speak specifically to that issue that you're talking about.

Mr SHELTON - My next question, and it goes to the Youth Justice workforce. It's come up in conversation this afternoon at different times, but can the minister please update the committee on the government's commitment to attract and retain staff across the Youth Justice workforce?

Ms PALMER - Yes, I absolutely can. I realise we're running out of time, but Chair, we also have a data answer to a question. I'd really appreciate your leniency so that I can answer the question here. I would like to put on the record the answer to the other question.

Thank you very much for this question. I'm certainly committed to championing and upholding children's rights and supporting a safe, child-centred culture for young people interacting with the youth justice system. Youth Justice staff operate in a complex and sometimes challenging environment, and they demonstrate their commitment to young people in their care every day.

The commission of inquiry told us we need to change how the department is organised so that we can change the way we work with children and young people and their families. Children and young people in our care have told us they want to be supported, to stay connected to the people and places that are important to them, with a worker they trust, to have clarity on their rights and to be involved in shared decision-making and receive clear communication. To achieve this, the department has recently endorsed and is now implementing a new leadership structure for the Child Safety and Youth Justice operations portfolio within the department.

PUBLIC

Ultimately, the intention of this structural change is to build the foundations of a service system that has relational, holistic practice at the heart, that sees safety as paramount and enables supports and care to be available at the right time.

Over the past 12 months, there's been a concentrated effort to recruit more staff to support young people, with extensive recruitment campaigns occurring across the Youth Justice services. During 2025, we completed two major recruitment campaigns and are in the final stages of a third for custodial Youth Justice workers. The completed recruitment processes resulted in nine successful candidates commencing induction training at AYDC in October 2025. Suitable international candidates applying for youth worker roles can be employed by the department on a fixed-term visa. The government applies a rigorous recruitment process for staff at AYDC.

CHAIR - The time for scrutiny has now expired. The next portfolio to appear before the committee is the Minister for Racing. We'll now take a short break, as time taken for breaks must be made up. Members, I ask you to be as quick as you can in the swap over.

The Committee suspended from 4.00 p.m. to 4.07 p.m.