

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Budget estimates 2020-21 (Parliament)

Melbourne—Wednesday, 16 December 2020

MEMBERS

Ms Lizzie Blandthorn—Chair

Mr Richard Riordan—Deputy Chair

Mr Sam Hibbins

Mr David Limbrick

Mr Gary Maas

Mr Danny O'Brien

Ms Pauline Richards

Mr Tim Richardson

Ms Nina Taylor

Ms Bridget Vallence

WITNESSES

Mr Colin Brooks, MP, Speaker of the Legislative Assembly,

Mr Nazih Elasmr, MLC, President of the Legislative Council,

Mr Peter Lochert, Secretary, Department of Parliamentary Services,

Ms Bridget Noonan, Clerk of the Legislative Assembly, and

Mr Andrew Young, Clerk of the Legislative Council, Parliament of Victoria.

The CHAIR: I declare open this hearing of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee.

I would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional Aboriginal owners of the land on which we are meeting. We pay our respects to them, their culture, their elders past, present and future and elders from other communities who may be here today.

On behalf of the Parliament, the committee is conducting this Inquiry into the 2020–21 Budget Estimates. Its aim is to scrutinise public administration and finance to improve outcomes for the Victorian community.

We note that witnesses and members may remove their masks when speaking to the committee but should replace them afterwards.

All mobile telephones should now be turned to silent.

All evidence taken by this committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. Comments repeated outside this hearing may not be protected by this privilege.

Witnesses will be provided with a proof version of the transcript to check. Verified transcripts, presentations and handouts will be placed on the committee's website as soon as possible.

We welcome the Presiding Officers, the clerks and the Secretary and invite you to make a presentation of no more than 5 minutes, which will be followed by questions from the committee. Thank you.

Mr BROOKS: Thank you very much, Chair. I know you have had a long day and a long week, so we will keep this presentation well under the 5 minutes as best we can and then free up time for questions and discussion that members may have.

Visual presentation.

Mr BROOKS: The first slide on the presentation really just gives people a headline view of the Parliament's appropriation. So, as members can see, there is a significant increase in our budget from last year, and we are happy to go through what that increase consists of if members were keen to have a look at that.

The next slide breaks down our budget into different areas. As members can see, the house departments and committees really make up a relatively small proportion of the overall parliamentary budget; DPS providing services across the organisation, a larger portion; and then of course members' budgets, which are effectively VIRTIPS-related items, and also members-administered budgets as well making up the rest of that particular section. The members-administered budget covers things like our electorate office salaries, utilities, telephones, security and the relocation and refurbishment process.

We thought we would just cover across some of the things that the Parliament sees as strategic priorities. Connecting and engaging with our community is a key part of what we see the Parliament doing, and some of that is directly connecting people to the Parliament and some is assisting members in that process. So that slide just lists a few of those things that the Parliament has been doing—some of them in real life, before COVID, and some of them of course as we have dealt with COVID have sort of morphed into virtual events as well. Youth Parliament is very popular—many members here have participated in that in some form; National Science Week; the women engaged in leadership forum. The First Peoples' Assembly, the inaugural assembly, was held here just in the chamber behind me. We have developed a *Disability Action and Inclusion Plan*, which I know that the

President and I see as a very key part of the planning for works here at the Parliament to make sure that we are an accessible Parliament for all Victorians. And our education programs are still very, very popular.

A key part of engaging with our communities, as all members would know, is ensuring that we have good, modern electorate offices for members to work out of in their communities and that they are accessible to their communities. Parliament has done a lot of work reshaping our framework and standards for electorate offices and improving them. Over the last few years there has not, I suppose, been a corresponding increase in funding for electorate offices to keep up with rental increases and the cost of refurbishments. So we have invested in electorate offices and, if you like, where we were finding we were being pushed into the back streets we are now pushing back into the main streets to make sure members' offices are accessible to the communities that they represent, and of course things like the security overlays to make sure that our staff and our members are safe as well.

COVID has obviously presented a challenge. I am sure you have heard that from just about every witness that you have had in front of you—the issues that we have dealt with. I might pass over to the President, who might wish to take us through some of these items.

Mr ELASMAR: Happy to do so. Thank you, Speaker, and good evening, everyone. This meal program, the charity meals—actually I would like to thank first of all the Honourable Shaun Leane, the former President; the Speaker; and the department of course for establishing this. From this program we have eight charities, and 890 000 meals so far have been distributed. The organisation delivers the meals to different charities, and of course Father Hugh is in charge of St Peter's across the road. The cost of this is \$1 million in 2019–20 and the budget for 2020–21 is over \$3.78 million. It is something we should all be happy with because it kept the staff working, kept the canteen open and the program was delivered without any delay—three different shift per day. This is about charity meals. Do you want me to continue?

Mr BROOKS: Yes, keep going.

Mr ELASMAR: The next one is 'Responding to COVID-19'. Responding to COVID-19—this is something we had never had experience of before. The sitting days were different in the Assembly. In the upper house we had to change the seating, even in the house itself. In the upper house we had people sitting in the back row; we had people sitting in the upper gallery. We asked for more cleaning to make sure that the safety plan was there, and that was all based on the department's advice, on the health advice. Again, I would like to thank the clerks here and the staff of Parliament and the department for helping us to make sure that was there.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I am sorry to interrupt you, but the 5 minutes has expired, so I will hand to Ms Bridget Vallence, MP.

Ms VALLENCE: Thank you, Chair, and thank you for appearing. First off to you, Speaker. The chief health officer gave you a range of advice during this COVID pandemic period for operating a safe working environment here in the Parliament: installing perspex screens in the chamber; additional cleaning, as you just described; new technology. Specific for that purpose and in response to advice from the CHO, how much additional expenditure was incurred by the Parliament for these safe operating measures?

Mr BROOKS: We might take that question on notice.

Ms VALLENCE: Even to date.

Mr BROOKS: Yes, just to make sure we get you the exact figure. There are some figures here in a briefing note that I have got, but I just want to make sure we get you the exact figure accurately, so we will take that one on notice if we can.

Ms VALLENCE: Okay, including technology and IT. And also did you engage or have any incremental security guards for that time?

Mr BROOKS: We maintained most of our security presence through the COVID lockdowns would be the answer to that question—varying levels, but yes.

Ms VALLENCE: Varying levels, so perhaps some increase? So, yes, if we could get a cost for that total expenditure relating to that, including for security, IT, cleaning and so forth.

Mr BROOKS: Yes, certainly.

Ms VALLENCE: You mentioned there in your presentation around electorate offices being accessible to their communities. Advice was provided by you, Speaker, to MPs that electorate offices were not essential workplaces and that they should be closed, that they were not permitted to be open, to be accessible to their communities. This advice was obviously later reversed. Can you advise—

The CHAIR: Sorry, Ms Vallence. This is a discussion about the budget estimates process and not about the government's or the Parliament's response to the COVID pandemic.

Ms VALLENCE: I am just responding to the presentation in terms of being—

The CHAIR: I think you are taking the presentation out of context, Ms Vallence. You need to either cite a budget reference or go down a different line of questioning.

Ms VALLENCE: Yes, budget paper 3, page 384. In terms of the costs associated with this measure where you advised MPs to close their offices, did you have a plan for enforcement?

Mr BROOKS: The Parliament is not responsible for—the Presiding Officers are not responsible for—the workplace directions that were issued. The Presiding Officers are employers of electorate officers, and the advice that I forwarded on was really to make electorate officers aware that they were not at that stage permitted workers under the government's permitted worker scheme. My concern was at that time, given the very short period of time between those announcements about the permitted worker scheme—and literally the next day after that email was sent out electorate officers would have been heading off to work—not exposing them to potentially being fined for heading to work when they were not permitted. So that was the background to the issue that you have raised.

Ms VALLENCE: Okay. So at that stage had you put any thought processes or any funding around dealing with that, auditing that, and what enforcement measures?

Mr BROOKS: No. It was advice provided to electorate officers and members about the scheme that the government and the chief health officer had put in place.

Ms VALLENCE: So, no?

Mr BROOKS: Well, I do not know what the funding would be applied to.

Ms VALLENCE: I guess to audit that it was being complied with, that your order was being complied with.

Mr BROOKS: No, I think we would assume that electorate officers would not want to get fined heading to work. But anyway, that issue was resolved several hours after that email was sent out.

Ms VALLENCE: Well, did you anticipate that the Parliament might be in breach if those offices were open?

The CHAIR: Ms Vallence, again I would remind you of the scope of this inquiry and that you are stretching well beyond it into what is an entirely different inquiry being conducted by this committee.

Ms VALLENCE: No, because this is related to the budget and that could have had cost implications for the Parliament. So I am just wondering if that was something that you contemplated and potentially provisioned for.

Mr BROOKS: At that time, no.

Ms VALLENCE: In the 2020–21 financial year Parliament is forecast to spend \$106 500 on one FTE labour hire security staff and \$1.24 million on contractors. Parliament spent \$1.267—or almost \$1.268—million on security in the 2019–20 year. What was the role for an additional labour hire security contractor to be hired by the Parliament?

Mr BROOKS: I might pass that one on to the Secretary.

The CHAIR: Sorry to interrupt, but Ms Vallence's time has expired.

Mr LOCHERT: I will take that one on notice, if you do not mind. I am trying to remember that particular position.

Ms VALLENCE: Thank you, Mr Lochert.

The CHAIR: I will hand the call to Mr Tim Richardson.

Mr RICHARDSON: Thank you, Chair, and thank you to the Presiding Officers and to the clerks and the Secretary for joining us. Can I say, while it is a little bit further off the budget, the appreciation of the electorate officers and indeed the communities for keeping electorate offices running during that time and keeping our staff safe, it is greatly appreciated. If we turn to COVID support of the Parliament during this time, it is fitting that the institution where we all represent our constituencies and support our communities was the place of great support during that time for vulnerable Victorians. I want to take you to the reference, budget paper 4, page 139. Are you able for the committee's benefit to further explain how the Parliament has used its resources to help Victorians in need?

Mr BROOKS: I am happy to kick off. I think the obvious answer to that is around the meals program that the President has referred to. The decision flowed from a desire for us to if possible not have casual staff at the Parliament lose work during the COVID pandemic when a lot of other people were out of work and the opportunity for those people to make an income was next to zero. The advice coming back from senior management was that a way that we could do that was to create the meals program to supply meals to charity partners—to employ the kitchen staff, if you like, for that cause. I think it has been a very successful project. It has been one that churns about just over 4000 meals a day to our charity partners.

We have made it clear all the way along that at some point the Parliament's operations will get back to normal as these restrictions ease, and there are also budgetary constraints around how long the program can continue for. The program is being funded for the rest of this financial year by the government, so we are grateful for that, and we are looking at ways that we can manage that meal production while at the same time starting to allow functions and meals for the normal operation of the Parliament to continue.

We have not had the chance to discuss it yet, but one of the things we were thinking about—certainly I was thinking about and discussing with the manager of our catering area—is other ways that the Parliament might be able to assist those charity partners into the future. So as maybe the meal production slows down, do we twin with some of those charity partners, like we twin with some South Pacific parliaments, and provide them with capacity building using our skills here at the Parliament in our organisation—IT, chamber advice and skills—to help those agencies with the capacity that they have in house? So that is an option we could look at.

I think the meals program has probably demonstrated that the Parliament can do those sorts of things where it looks to the local community, it looks to the Victorian community and particularly vulnerable Victorians and uses some of the resources that we have got to help people in need.

Mr RICHARDSON: Fantastic. Do you envisage any of those will continue beyond that financial period?

Mr BROOKS: Look, at this point we are funded to the end of the financial year. As I said, we have got some time now to think about how we transition and also, as I said before, see how the new year pans out. Hopefully it is a good year in terms of COVID and we are able to see the restrictions ease further and get back to much more normal operation, but we need to sort of step carefully as we head into the new year in terms of the commitments we make. But at this stage, subject to the capacity of the kitchen's crew and their other roles, we will head through to the end of the financial year.

Mr RICHARDSON: Fantastic. If I can, Chair, I will direct a question to the Secretary if possible. Just in relation to COVID adaptation, obviously a lot of changes have been made around the Parliament. What steps have been taken by your team to make sure the Parliament of Victoria is a COVID-safe workplace?

Mr LOCHERT: Thank you. The first point of reaction to the COVID emergency, if you want to call it that, was to convene an incident management team, which is sort of a peak body for the Parliament that will manage a response and make sure that every measure that we then implemented was something that took into account all of the parliamentary departments and all of the parliamentary operations, and that includes therefore the Council and the Assembly departments as well. The first were the obvious and very visible sorts of measures of

social distancing and adapting the sittings and the operations of the Parliament to focus purely on the sittings, additional cleaning, additional training of people, monitoring of visitors, having temperature checking at every entrance and all those sorts of things, the provision of more information and generally just implementing every one of those guidelines and directions that the chief health officer put out.

The biggest challenge was to get around 1400 to 1500 users of the IT system to work from home. We were lucky in that we had been working on a digitisation program for the last four years, so our infrastructure was at a point where we could do this. We did it within about nine days for the bulk of the users, and the credit really needs to go to the people who were suddenly landed with an awful lot of tools and facilities with no warning and no training. These were things that were scheduled to be deployed at some stage and were able to go out very quickly on that basis. It seems to be successful.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Mr Sam Hibbins, MP.

Mr HIBBINS: Thanks, Chair. And thank you all for appearing this evening. Can the committee get an update in terms of the development of a reconciliation action plan?

Mr BROOKS: Yes. So for members who might not be aware, one of the strategic directions of the Parliament is to better engage with the First Peoples. A team of parliamentary officers formed a working group to develop the reconciliation action plan, and that complements a range of initiatives that the Parliament has taken in the past and is working on now to better acknowledge the traditional owners of the land here in Victoria. The reconciliation action plan working group I think has presented to the House Committee, and I think we are now heading into the action plan stage of the reconciliation action plan.

Mr HIBBINS: Yes. And in terms of other actions to take place, obviously the former member for Northcote raised these issues some time ago, you know, things like acknowledging the traditional owners in signage outside of Parliament and giving guidance to members to be able to do the same at their electorate offices. Is that something that is on the table, or are you waiting for the reconciliation action plan to be completed?

Mr BROOKS: Like I said, there are some actions that the Parliament is progressing. We have engaged Tom Day, the artist, to create a piece for the main corridor, an Indigenous piece, and he has worked with Indigenous students at Shepparton high school—I think that is the correct name of the school—to create that piece. It is probably the focal point at this point in time in terms of reflecting that heritage. I think it is also fair to say—I do not think there is any secrecy around this—that we are in discussions with the Wurundjeri people about a way to bring the portrait of William Barak back to the Parliament from the State Library. The state library has very generously agreed to have that portrait come back to the Parliament of Victoria, where it was. For the people who know the story behind William Barak, it is a very symbolic story of Indigenous struggle. I think to have that portrait back here at the Parliament of Victoria, where it once hung, will be a great thing as well.

Mr HIBBINS: All right. Terrific. Thanks. That is all from me. Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Mr Hibbins. Mr Danny O'Brien.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Thanks, Chair. Good evening, everyone. Mr Lochert, perhaps following up the question that Ms Vallence just asked, the reference is to the Parliament questionnaire, just so you are aware. There is an occupation in there: security services for \$106 000 for one FTE. I am not sure whether that helps you in answering the question.

Mr LOCHERT: I will have to go back, if you do not mind, and check exactly what that particular position would be, but in general terms where the security expenses in particular through contractors have been, it is not just on normal security coverage for the Parliament but also a lot of the building projects that we have had and where, for example, we have had a requirement to work over weekends or during particular sort of concentrated efforts. So that is where I would imagine it would be, but I will check it in particular.

Mr D O'BRIEN: It does seem a little odd, though, that there is one overall contract, a fixed-fee contract, and then a second specific one FTE. Anyway, I will leave that with you.

Mr LOCHERT: Correct. I will check that.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Likewise in the questionnaire there is a reference that Parliament spent \$125 000 on a specialist human rights consultant to scrutinise Bills and regulations in 2019–20. What was that for?

Mr LOCHERT: That would be a committee.

Mr BROOKS: I am advised that is probably Dr Jeremy Gans, who works with the Scrutiny of Acts and Regulations Committee.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Okay. Did he provide any specialist human rights advice on the state of emergency Bill, the state of emergency amendments or the COVID omnibus Bills?

Mr BROOKS: We are advised that if he did, it would be in the *Alert Digest*.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Okay. Thank you. Staff on joint investigatory committees increased from 23.8 FTE in 2019 to 24.6 in June 2020, but the forecast is for those staff numbers to remain the same, yet there is a 3.5 per cent reduction—\$200 000 reduction—in actual funding this year. So how is that going to be absorbed when there are no staff losses?

Mr BROOKS: The majority of the issue that you are referring to I think is the one-off, or the once in every four years, Auditor-General's office performance audit. So there was \$350 000 funding in last year's budget which is not included in this year's budget for joint investigatory committees, nor will it be included for the next two.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Sorry, so I am looking at page 384 of budget paper 3. There is a \$200 000 reduction. Are you saying that was an increase in last year's budget simply for that audit?

Mr BROOKS: I think so. I have not got that budget paper in front of me, but I do know that, as I said, there was a one-off increase last year of \$350 000 for the VAGO performance audit which then does not occur this year. So that funding is not there for this year.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Okay. Likewise the performance targets, and this is again in response to the questionnaire, for reports tabled per annum for the committees. The previous target was 28. The new target is 20—I reckon that is ambitious. The explanation for that is that the lower target reflects the reduction in the number of committees, but that decision about the reduction in the number of joint investigatory committees was made at the start of 2019. I am just wanting to know how that reduction is accounted for.

Ms NOONAN: Thanks, Mr O'Brien. I will have a stab at answering that. You are right. The committee restructure was announced at the start of last year. However, by the time the changes actually came into effect, budget papers were published and targets were already out in the public domain. So the lower targets in this year's budget papers actually reflect the number of committees, as you point out, that we have had for some time, but there was a time lag in actually implementing that. Does that kind of answer your question? It sounds a bit roundabout.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Yes. I guess in the brief time left, that target is probably going to be wiped out anyway, given the additional inquiries, including PAEC's COVID inquiry that we are going to be doing.

Ms NOONAN: And I think when you factor in the fact that the scrutiny committee virtually tables a report each sitting week, we actually quite quickly get up to our target.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr O'Brien. Mr Tim Richardson.

Mr RICHARDSON: Thank you, Chair. I might just go back to questioning for the Secretary. I want to refer you, Secretary, to budget paper 4, page 139, which references funding for members' salaries. I understand that under the *Parliamentary Salaries, Allowances and Superannuation Act* the number of shadow ministers is limited to no more than the number of government ministers. There are currently 21 ministers, but the Leader of the Opposition recently announced a reshuffle to 22 shadow ministers. How is this possible under the Act?

Ms VALLENCE: A point of order. Can we have a budget paper reference? I really love following all of—

Mr RICHARDSON: Budget paper 4, page 139—

Mr MAAS: It was the first thing he mentioned.

Mr RICHARDSON: I said it in the first words.

The CHAIR: Thank you, yes. It was the budget paper—

Ms VALLENCE: Can you point specifically—what budget paper reference was that?

Mr RICHARDSON: Budget paper 4, page 139.

Ms VALLENCE: Budget paper 4, so not the state capital program budget paper—

The CHAIR: Ms Vallence, the member has—

Mr RICHARDSON: Page 139—a bit touchy about shadow salaries. You were not the one who take the pay cut, were you, Bridget?

The CHAIR: There is no point of order. A budget reference—

Mr D O'BRIEN: It has actually been publicly announced, Tim. You should have paid more attention.

The CHAIR: There is no point of order—

Mr RICHARDSON: Is it possible under the Act is the question.

Mr RIORDAN: He is not questioning him about opposition numbers on there.

The CHAIR: Mr Richardson, Deputy Chair and Ms Vallence, the budget reference has been given three times. Secretary—

Mr D O'BRIEN: It hasn't stopped you in the past.

Mr RIORDAN: On a point of order, Chair, there is a section here on replacement of gender equity when a minister resigns.

Mr RICHARDSON: Are you just reading random sections out of the budget?

Mr RIORDAN: I am just wondering, what is the policy when someone resigns?

The CHAIR: Deputy Chair, you do not have the call. There was a budget reference given. Mr Richardson, the call is with you.

Mr RICHARDSON: How is it possible under the Act, Secretary?

Mr LOCHERT: Under the Act the number of shadow ministers that can be paid is determined by the provisions of the Act. What is named or announced is not provided for in the Act.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Oh, what a gotcha question that was.

Mr RICHARDSON: So are all shadows ministers then being paid as shadow ministers?

Mr LOCHERT: Those shadow ministers who are designated as shadow ministers—correct, yes.

Mr RICHARDSON: So the 22, all together, are being paid as shadow ministers?

Mr LOCHERT: I would have to go back to the payroll. Can I also indicate that all of the payment of ministers comes under the Department of Premier and Cabinet rather than us.

Mr RIORDAN: Oh, rule that question out of order.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Rule it out of order, Chair.

The CHAIR: Deputy Chair.

Mr LOCHERT: We do the payroll as a pay bureau on directions from DPC. So in terms of determining—

Ms VALLENCE: Mr Richardson is reading the wrong set of questions.

Mr LOCHERT: which individual person is paid a particular salary, we would get—

The CHAIR: Ms Vallence, you have had your turn.

Ms VALLENCE: Reading the wrong set of questions.

The CHAIR: Ms Vallence, the call is not with you.

Mr LOCHERT: that direction from Premier and Cabinet, yes.

Mr RICHARDSON: So in saying that, you could not add light then on the *Herald Sun*'s recent report that the Liberal Party intends to fund this extra shadow minister through its other members? That will not be administered by the department of the Parliament?

Mr LOCHERT: Unless there is some direction from DPC, no.

Mr RICHARDSON: So is that noted then in your annual records—what those pay levels are and those thresholds as you administer it?

Mr LOCHERT: We certainly would be reporting on every pay that we do, yes.

Mr RICHARDSON: So are you able, Secretary, to take on notice and inform the committee which member might be reducing their pay in order to comply with that as per your records?

Mr LOCHERT: I will take that on notice, if you do not mind.

Mr D O'BRIEN: A point of order, Chair.

The CHAIR: Mr O'Brien.

Mr D O'BRIEN: I am just interested to know how the affairs of a particular member of Parliament being reported to this committee is relevant to the budget?

Mr RICHARDSON: It is good to see you sticking up for the Libs there, Danny.

Mr D O'BRIEN: On the point, Mr Richardson—

The CHAIR: Mr O'Brien.

Mr RICHARDSON: It is a budget reference, and it is over the entitlement, and what—should the Act change?

Mr D O'BRIEN: No, no. You specifically asked—

Mr Riordan interjected.

The CHAIR: Mr O'Brien! Deputy Chair! Mr O'Brien, you have the call.

Mr D O'BRIEN: To clarify the question, to clarify the point of order, Chair, the question was: can the Parliament provide for us which Liberal Party shadow minister is over the entitlement? That is not relevant in any way, shape or form. And, Chair, we have been interrupted and stopped from asking our questions for the last couple of weeks. That you are going to let this question stand is just wrong, and if you would like to get some advice on chairing, given we are using the standing orders of the Legislative Assembly, perhaps the Speaker could assist you.

The CHAIR: On the point of order, Mr Richardson.

Mr RICHARDSON: On the point of order, I am surprised the member for Gippsland South is saying that we are not accountable to the Victorian people on what we are paid in this place. What an extraordinary assertion.

Mr D O'BRIEN: We are accountable.

Mr RIORDAN: A point of order.

The CHAIR: I have not ruled on the existing point of order. The existing point of order is not a point of order. Deputy Chair, do you have a new point of order?

Mr RIORDAN: A new point of order. As I understood what was said, Chair, Mr Lochert said there is only a payment of 22. Therefore what people of the 22 decide to do with their own money is none of this committee's business. It would be like asking Mr Richardson to declare which union he pays his funds into.

Ms Vallence interjected.

The CHAIR: Deputy Chair, there is no point of order. Ms Vallence, you do not have the call. The call is with Mr David Limbrick, MLC.

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you, Chair. This is more exciting than I expected.

Mr RIORDAN: There is a job on offer at this end of the table.

Mr LIMBRICK: I am not going near any of that. You guys can keep it amongst yourselves.

I wanted to ask about, and this is probably for Mr Lochert: we have been progressively opening up Parliament, and I imagine hopefully that will continue throughout the new year. What is the plan and time line on how we will have some more opening up? So I know there are things like we would want to get visitors in—like guests of MPs—and then eventually open up to the public and things like that. Are we going to wait until the state of emergency is over before we open up to the public, or how is that going to work?

Mr BROOKS: I am happy to jump in, and then maybe the Secretary, if that is okay, Mr Limbrick—through you, Chair. We actually had a discussion about this at our management meeting today, earlier on. We obviously are keen to get public access back into the building—public tours—and get back to a sense of normal. We just want to make sure that we are doing so in accordance with the health advice. So we will seek some advice over the break and hopefully get to that point. There was a brief discussion about this concept at House Committee back probably when we were still in a more perilous situation in COVID. The general view of members there seemed to be that, without breaching committee confidence, the most important thing was to get members in. I know that in the Council all members are in the chamber. In the Assembly we left the sitting year with approximately a third of the members in the chamber at any one time. Of course the desire is to get that back to a more normal function as a priority—get the democratic function up and running first—and if that means we have to delay a little bit of the public access to get that happening, then we will. But our priority is to get the democratic functions running quickly and then, if we can, get the public back into the building soon after that.

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you. One of the things I noticed is, with the different topic about the charity kitchen, it is like utilising underused resources in Parliament, right. I know the motivation for it was to help casual staff, by the sound of it, but then there was also a kitchen that was not being used, so why not use it? Is there consideration being given to other under-utilised resources at Parliament that might be available for other purposes? The bowling green springs to mind. It is a beautiful bowling green, but I have only seen it used a couple of times.

Mr BROOKS: I was just going to say I do not think there are under-utilised assets at the Parliament, but then you have proven me wrong. Yes, look, that is probably a good thing. I mean, I think we could look at ways to better utilise many aspects of the Parliament. I think that meals program has probably reminded us to cast an eye over what we do here at the Parliament and how we can do those things, as I said earlier—so anyone who has ideas around the way we can do those sorts of things in the community. As I said before, we twin with three South Pacific parliaments and help them in terms of their capacity, really, and their skills. We should have a think about how we do that with some local charities as well, as an option.

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you. Just quickly, have there been any significant savings in the budget from the lack of travel? Because normally committees would travel a fair bit and that would be a significant expense. I am not expecting there is going to be a lot of travel in this financial year, I would imagine. What sort of savings are we expecting with that?

Mr BROOKS: Yes. I can get you the exact figure. I do not have it at hand, but there were definitely savings. In fact part of the rationale behind the meals program was that we had an under-utilised kitchen, we wanted to keep our staff employed and we had savings from the Parliament not doing all the things that we usually have to pay for, so it was a combination of those three things. We will get you an exact figure.

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you very much.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Limbrick. Ms Nina Taylor, MLC.

Ms TAYLOR: Presiding Officers, can you please update us on the progress of Parliament's disability and inclusion plan? What groups have been engaged in consultation?

Mr BROOKS: Yes. This is a long-overdue piece of work that the Parliament has embarked upon. I have to pay credit to the parliamentary staff who have driven this project. The disability, action and inclusion plan has come up to the House Committee for consideration and approval. Its next main action is a disability access audit, so that will involve obviously getting an expert in to see how we might be able to improve access to the building. I mean, the disability, access and inclusion plan does not just look at physical access—it looks at how people access our democratic processes more broadly and how parliamentary staff engage with people with a range of disabilities, so it is a pretty broad plan, well thought through.

The next action I think—one certainly that I am keen to see progress—will be the disability access plan for the physical layout of the building here. One of the challenges of running a modern, contemporary Parliament in a heritage building is that when this place was built the sort of access standards that we like to see now and we expect to see now were not included, so there is the challenge of retrofitting some of those things. The works that we do around the place do help to improve access. The east wing works, which are about fixing up level 3 to create a flat floor plate upstairs—on levels 3 and 4 it will be—also include two new lifts that will be, as opposed to the current old lift, fully accessible and OH&S compliant.

Members, visitors and people with disabilities will be able to move between all of the different levels of the Parliament without having to move across the building and hit stairs and those sorts of things. There is a lot of work that has already been done in the precinct in particular. Members will also be aware that there are access requirements when we fit out electorate offices to ensure that there is a level of accessibility in electorate offices as well. We can certainly forward that access plan to members of the committee if they are interested in reading the whole document.

Ms TAYLOR: Sounds good. In Victoria we are very proud of our local produce from fruit and veg, meat and dairy, and our world-class beverages from our breweries, wineries and distilleries. I understand that the catering department has a policy commitment to source only Victorian produce and Victorian supply chains. Has this commitment been met? And how often is it reviewed?

Mr LOCHERT: I will take the comment. In general, yes, it has been met, except occasionally we are required to meet special requirements for a function or something like that, whether it is an external client or something else, but as a matter of course the catering function will source all of their produce and all of their ingredients locally. We have not been able to do it this year, but last year we were doing a rotation through the 12 regional areas of Victoria tying tourism and produce with the menus that we were having here. It is just using it as a vehicle not only to make sure that we can showcase Victoria in general but specifically linking in with members and being able to showcase distinct areas of the state.

Ms TAYLOR: Excellent, sounds good. Now, I am just thinking, one of Parliament's strategic priorities is engaging the public and school tours, and we all love them. We love them when they come in, and it is also an important educational resource. With the pandemic, obviously this has interrupted some of those normal methods of engagement. What has been done during the pandemic to expand the scope of outreach activities? I think I have seen some of them, but tell us more.

Mr BROOKS: Like a few things, COVID has created a range of challenges but has also meant that the Parliament has adapted and in some ways found new ways of doing things that has forced change upon the Parliament, which has in some respects been a good thing. One of the key ones has been—members will know about this—the school tours that occur, the role-plays that occur in a normal setting in the chambers, where you will come in here on a non-sitting day and you will see school groups acting out the bill passing in the chamber or getting a tour through the building. That has all gone online. Is that the—

The CHAIR: That is the clock, yes. Thank you, Speaker.

Mr D O'BRIEN: That is the bell. The member's time has expired.

The CHAIR: The member's time has expired. Mr Riordan, Deputy Chair, has the call.

Mr RIORDAN: Thank you, Chair. I guess this is to both the Speaker and the President. One thing that has fascinated me over this year of doing things differently is that our chief health officer has managed to have what seems to me two very different sets of rules between the two houses. Going to ours you would think you were trapped in a Lego block; you go into next door here and they have just got them sprinkled around the gallery. They have a full house, and we are all locked in our rooms as if we are all going to die of black death. Can we have some understanding as to how it came about that two completely different sets of rules could be applied to the same building, (a), and—

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan, I would remind you that this is a consideration of the budget estimates.

Mr RIORDAN: Yes, and I am referring very much to the fact that we seem to have incurred—

The CHAIR: Because the committee members are very eager to follow along with the budget papers, did you have a budget reference?

Mr RIORDAN: I do have a budget reference, and it is to budget paper 3, page 384, and my question is: how did we arrive at those differences and what budget-saving efforts will be applied when we come back in February to resume normal trading?

Mr BROOKS: Okay. In terms of the application of the health advice, that was consistent across the precinct. We took time to make sure that when we brought Parliament back the advice that we had received—which was based upon workplace advice for all Victorian workplaces, but there was some specific advice for the Parliament as well—was consistent across the precinct. There were differences in the number of members in the chamber and the ability for members to space. I cannot comment directly on the Council, for example, on the screening on the table, but my understanding from earlier conversations is there was a lot more distance across the table between members than, for example, in the Assembly.

We, in the Assembly, installed perspex where distancing was not always possible and where there was the ability for people to be talking loudly—dare I say shouting—over the table. And around Hansard, around the broadcast operator, around the clerks, in front of me between the clerks and between the three or two people at the table those perspex screens were installed in accordance with the advice that we received from the CHO that that should be considered. I am sure the Council would have considered that as well based on their distancing requirements.

Mr RIORDAN: And was it your decision or the CHO's decision that we could not use the other gallery spaces in the Assembly?

Mr BROOKS: No, I do not think anyone made the decision. The number of members in the chamber and where they sit was by agreement between the parties and included as part of the motion—not the seating arrangements but the number of members in the chamber was by the government and the opposition agreeing on a motion for the sitting of the house.

Mr ELASMAR: Chair, if I may add to the Speaker. The difference between the lower house and the upper house, as you know, we did not have screens in the chamber because they were not required. It is not the same where the Premier sits and the opposition; we have the distance available.

Mr RIORDAN: So President, unlike the rumour in the lower house, it had nothing to do with the fact that you sleep a lot more up there than we do?

Mr ELASMAR: It is a completely different sitting. The Premier sits opposite to the opposition. We do not have that, and we used the gallery and the upper gallery.

Mr RIORDAN: Okay. Thank you. I will just cede my last minute or two to Danny—1 minute.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Thank you. I have got a question with a table in the questionnaire again. It forecasts FTE numbers of electorate officers for 2021 will increase both for men and for women, which means that we will go from 100 per cent men and women to 107 per cent. Can anyone explain to me how that is possible? We have got more womanly women than more manly men?

Mr LOCHERT: No, I cannot explain that, Mr O'Brien.

Mr D O'BRIEN: I have got lots of other questions, but my time has expired, I believe.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr O'Brien. Ms Nina Taylor, MLC.

Ms TAYLOR: Mr Riordan might want to pay a little visit to the upper house; he will see what we actually do there—there ain't no sleeping.

Anyway, getting back to what we were talking about but were cut off at the critical moment—talking about the outreach.

Mr BROOKS: Thank you very much, Ms Taylor. On the school program, I think one of the great things has been the incursions that now occur, so the tour operators run out of the chamber, Zoomed—not Zoom; I cannot remember the name of the platform the education department use—

Ms NOONAN: Webex.

Mr BROOKS: Webex, and run that program remotely. Of course the benefit of that is that, particularly for regional and remote schools that might not get into Melbourne or have the capacity to get in as often, it means that they have got that access. It means even for metro schools that they have got the ability to do that much more easily than organising buses and bussing children into the Parliament as well. So that is a program that hopefully will continue into the future as well in combination with the in-person tours.

The other one which I thought would work quite well but I think about six people took it up—I do not know if any of the members of the committee did—was 'meet your MP'. Members will often go out to their local schools, and during COVID obviously that was not possible—schools were in some cases learning remotely at some points, and obviously members were not going out to those schools. But there was the opportunity that Parliament offered to members to do those school visits from the chamber and facilitate those 'meet your MP' sessions. I did one of them, and I found it a really great experience. The kids who were learning from home got to ask all the questions they often ask their MPs when you go out and get grilled by your grade 5s and 6s.

Ms TAYLOR: Excellent. Now, million-dollar question: when is it anticipated that Parliament will be reopening to the public, and what measures will be in place to ensure it is COVID safe?

Mr BROOKS: As I mentioned before, we had a discussion in general terms about reopening at this morning's management meeting. We are keen to get the functions of the chambers operating as best we can as a priority and then look at how we get the public back in for public tours, visitors that might come and meet with members, public galleries open, school tours, as I said. But we need to do that on the basis of any health advice that there is, so we need to work through that health advice, all of our parliamentary staff, and come to a fairly careful, considered position ahead of the new parliamentary year, which kicks off in early Feb. So that work is continuing and underway.

Ms TAYLOR: Excellent. I know for the benefit of everyone here we obviously want to make sure that not only are we protecting each other but the community as well. There is no need to get ahead of that.

Mr BROOKS: Correct.

Ms TAYLOR: You did speak before about the refurbishments to help people with disabilities. When are they likely to be completed? How long is that program?

Mr BROOKS: Well, there are a range of measures in the *Disability Action and Inclusion Plan*, some of which, like I said before, involve training for staff, so those sorts of things can be rolled out sooner than others. Some of them, as I said before, revolve around physical improvements to the building, which will flow out of an audit. That audit I think takes place early next year. That will give us an understanding of what sort of capital changes we might need to make. But there are a significant number of measures in that plan that might assist those people with disabilities to better access the Parliament and its proceedings. And of course there are a whole range of ways through digital means that the Parliament is making access more available to people. Our Auslan bulletin—if people have seen the Auslan bulletin—is a very popular initiative, again driven by our community engagement unit. So there are a range of different ways, but the Parliament is doing exactly what you are talking about.

Ms TAYLOR: That sounds good. Tell me a little bit more. I did not know about that. Why did I not know about that?

Mr BROOKS: The Auslan bulletin?

Ms TAYLOR: Where have I been?

Mr BROOKS: The Auslan bulletin is actually a good way to catch up and get an overview of what has happened at Parliament during the week. It is a video clip with someone through Auslan telling people what has happened at Parliament during the week. I actually find it quite useful myself to find out what has happened in the upper house, not knowing what sort of heavy workload people have had in the upper house and around the parliamentary precinct. So it is a good initiative.

Ms TAYLOR: Sounds terrific.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. The time we have set aside for consideration with you this evening has finished.

We thank you very much for joining us today. The committee will follow up on any questions taken on notice in writing, and responses will be required within 10 working days of the committee's request.

We thank ministers, officers, Presiding Officers, clerks, commissioners, everyone who has attended today, and of course Hansard, the secretariat and the catering and cleaning staff, who have supported the committee.

The committee will resume its consideration of the 2020–21 budget estimates tomorrow.

We declare this hearing adjourned. Thank you.

Mr BROOKS: Thank you.

Mr LOCHERT: Thank you.

Committee adjourned.