

# THURSDAY, 3 AUGUST 2023

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## ESTIMATES—EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING COMMITTEE— EDUCATION; INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS; RACING

### Estimate Committee Members

Ms KE Richards—Chair  
Mr JP Lister  
Mr MA Boothman  
Mr N Dametto  
Mr BL O'Rourke  
Mr JA Sullivan

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### Members in Attendance

Dr CAC Rowan  
Mr TJ Nicholls  
Mr TL Mander  
Mr JP Bleijie  
Mr MC Berkman  
Mr BA Mickelberg  
Mrs LJ Gerber  
Mr SSJ Andrew  
Dr A MacMahon

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### In Attendance

Hon. G Grace, Minister for Education, Minister for Industrial Relations and Minister for Racing  
Ms K Dougherty, Chief of Staff  
Ms L Booth, Senior Policy Advisor  
Mr S Jones, Policy Advisor  
Mr K Hopkins, Policy Advisor  
**Department of Education**  
Mr M De'Ath, Director-General  
Mr D Anson, Assistant Director-General, Finance and Chief Finance Officer  
Ms T Elliott, Deputy Director-General, Infrastructure Services  
**Department of Agriculture and Fisheries**  
Dr C Sarra, Director-General  
**Racing Queensland**  
Mr J Scott, Chief Executive Officer  
**Queensland Racing Integrity Commission**  
Ms N Conner, Acting Commissioner  
**Office of Industrial Relations**


Mr P McKay, Acting Deputy Director-General, Office of Industrial Relations

**WorkCover Queensland**

Mr D Heley, A/Chief Executive Officer, WorkCover Queensland

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**The committee met at 8.59 am.**

 **CHAIR:** Good morning. I declare this hearing of estimates for the Education, Employment and Training Committee open. I want to respectfully acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet and pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging. We are very fortunate in this country to have two of the world's oldest continuing living cultures in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people whose lands, winds and waters we all now share.

I am Kim Richards, the member for Redlands and chair of the Education, Employment and Training Committee. With me here today is James Lister, the member for Southern Downs and deputy chair. The other members of our committee are Mr Mark Boothman, the member for Theodore; Mr Nick Dametto, the member for Hinchinbrook; Mr Barry O'Rourke, the member for Rockhampton; and Mr Jimmy Sullivan, the member for Stafford. The committee has granted leave for a number of non-committee members to attend and ask questions at this hearing. The list is long, so I will start with Dr Christian Rowan, the member for Moggill, who is joining us here at the table today.

Today the committee will consider the Appropriation Bill 2023 and the budget estimates for the committee's areas of responsibility. I remind everyone present that any person may be excluded from the proceedings at my discretion as chair or by order of the committee. Today I intend to conduct these proceedings in a respectful manner and I expect all who participate in today's proceedings to act accordingly. The committee has authorised its hearing to be broadcast live, televised and photographed. Copies of the committee's conditions for broadcasters of proceedings are available from the secretariat. While mobile phone use is not permitted in the public gallery, an exception has been made for staff who are assisting witnesses here today and who have been permitted the use of their devices for this purpose. I do ask all present, however, to ensure that your phones and other electronic devices are switched to silent mode, if not turned off.

The House has determined that the committee will examine the estimates for its portfolio areas as follows: education, industrial relations and racing from 9 am until 2 pm and youth justice, employment, small business, training and skills development from 2.30 until 6.45 pm. The committee will now examine the proposed expenditure contained in the Appropriation Bill 2023 for the portfolio of the Minister for Education, Minister for Industrial Relations and Minister for Racing until 2 pm. As was determined by the House, the committee will examine areas within the minister's portfolio as follows: education from 9 am to 10.30 am and from 10.45 am until 11.45 am; racing from 12.30 pm to 1 pm; and industrial relations from 1 pm until 2 pm. I remind honourable members that matters relating to these portfolio areas can only be raised during the times specified for the area, as was agreed by the House. The committee will suspend proceedings for breaks from 10.30 to 10.45 am and from 11.45 until 12.30 pm.

The committee will commence with the examination of the estimates for the education portfolio area. I remind those present today that the committee's proceedings are proceedings of the Queensland parliament and subject to the standing rules and orders of the Legislative Assembly. It is important that questions and answers remain relevant and succinct. The same rules for questions that apply in the Legislative Assembly apply in this hearing, and I refer to standing orders 112 and 115 in this regard. Questions should be brief and relate to one issue only and they should not contain lengthy or subjective preambles, argument or opinion. As I said, I intend to guide these proceedings today so that relevant issues can be respectfully and fully explored and to ensure that there is adequate opportunity to address questions from government and non-government members of the committee.

On behalf of the committee, I welcome the minister, the director-general, officials and members of the public to the hearing. For the benefit of Hansard, I ask officials to identify themselves the first time they answer a question referred to them by the minister or the director-general. I now declare the proposed expenditure for the portfolio areas of education, industrial relations and racing open for examination. The question before the committee is—

That the proposed expenditure be agreed to.

Minister, I invite you, if you wish, to make an opening statement of no more than five minutes. Welcome.

**Ms GRACE:** Thank you, Chair. I welcome the chair, the deputy chair and all members of the committee and obviously my shadow, the member for Moggill. I also welcome the opportunity to address the Education, Employment and Training Committee. I am joined at the table today by my department's Director-General, Michael De'Ath, and my new Chief of Staff, Katelyn Dougherty.

I am delighted to be continuing in my role as Minister for Education, Minister for Industrial Relations and Minister for Racing. Before I go further in my opening statement, I want to say just how appalled I was to hear about the abhorrent nature of the charges laid against a former early childcare worker and the profound breach of trust represented by the alleged offending. My thoughts are with the families affected and I want to assure Queenslanders that we will leave no stone unturned when it comes to protecting our children and keeping them safe. I also want to take this opportunity to pay tribute to the thousands of childcare workers who look after our youngest Queenslanders with care and kindness every single day and obviously to the police officers and investigators who have had to trawl through this vile material in order to build their case.

I will combine all my portfolios in this opening statement, beginning with education. Since last year's estimates hearings I have had the privilege of visiting more than 60 wonderful state schools and early childcare centres. Wherever I visit—from vertical inner-city schools like Fortitude Valley State Secondary College in my electorate to the 18 campuses of Tagai State College spread across 15 islands in the Torres Strait—I am always struck by the unwavering commitment of our outstanding teachers, teacher aides, principals, staff and everyone in our schools to provide our children with a world-class education no matter where they live. I was delighted earlier this year to announce that we will be doubling the remote area tuition allowance, meaning families of students from some of Queensland's most isolated regions will now receive an extra \$4,000 a year—a real cost-of-living relief. I want to thank the Isolated Children's Parents' Association for their instrumental role in this.

No two schools and no two students are the same and different circumstances require different support. This is what drives the Palaszczuk government's new education strategy, Equity and Excellence, and I look forward to sharing updates with the committee today. We are delivering yet another record school and early education budget of \$17.8 billion. This includes free kindy for all Queenslanders, and I am so proud to be the education minister introducing this historic reform to our state. Not only will it leave a positive legacy for years to come; it will also provide cost-of-living relief, with families set to save up to \$4,600 per year. It is great speaking to those families and talking about how it is going to assist. Our investment includes \$120 million to attract and retain a quality workforce, because free kindy would mean nothing without the dedicated teachers and staff who will actually deliver this vital service.

It is the same in our schools. Our school leaders, teachers and teacher aides truly are the foundation of our world-class education system, setting up our kids for a great future, and that is why the Palaszczuk government have put thousands more in our classrooms. Thanks to our excellent enterprise bargaining agreement, Queensland teachers now have some of the best pay and conditions in the country. This includes an extensive attraction and retention package for those in regional, rural and remote areas, including housing support and relocation assistance. I want nothing less than for my department to be the employer of choice for teachers from around Australia and indeed the world.

All of our staff and students deserve to work and learn in world-class facilities, which is why our ambitious investment in education infrastructure continues. There is \$2.1 billion this year alone to build, improve, expand and maintain schools right across the state, and I know many members at the table are getting the benefit of that. Earlier this year it was announced that East Brisbane State School would not be able to remain at its current location beyond the end of 2025 due to the redevelopment of the Gabba. Following school and community consultation, today I can announce that East Brisbane school will be relocated as a standalone primary school on the nearby Coorparoo Secondary College site. The under-utilised 11-hectare site is a short distance away, has extensive green space, safe drop-off zones and capacity for the expected future growth in the East Brisbane State School community. The current constrained 1.5-hectare site is bordered by three main roads and has limited access to green space. We will invest more than \$100 million to deliver brand new world-class facilities at a new, bigger site and I look forward to working closely with the school and broader community throughout the relocation.

In the industrial relations portfolio the Palaszczuk government continues our proud record of standing up for and supporting Queensland workers with our nation-leading reforms. This year important codes have come into force, giving our workers some of the strongest protections in the country when it comes to psychological wellbeing and silicosis prevention. Our changes to the IR Act have also strengthened protections for workers subjected to sexual harassment and sex and

gender-based harassment, as well as ensuring industrial protections remain consistent with the changing nature of work.

In the racing portfolio, the independent IER report found the economic contribution of the Queensland racing industry has soared 83 per cent under the Palaszczuk government to a record \$2.2 billion. Racing is thriving in this state and our new sustainable funding model is not only providing certainty, but also a big boost to our country racing clubs which are at the heart of so many of our regional and remote communities. Chair, thank you for the opportunity to make an opening statement and I am happy to take questions from the committee.

**CHAIR:** Terrific. Thank you very much, Minister. Before we kick off questions, I remind all members that questions will come through the chair today. Deputy Chair?

**Mr LISTER:** Chair, I defer to the member for Moggill.

**Dr ROWAN:** My first question is to the director-general with reference to SDS page 11, capital program, and also the Department of Education's contract disclosure report for 2022-23. The value of three listed contracts awarded to Downer EDI in October of 2020 has now blown out by over \$5 million to over \$13 million. Can you explain this 76 per cent increase?

**Mr De'Ath:** I would ask the deputy director-general infrastructure to come to the table to support the response to this question. Essentially, I think we are all very aware of the conditions that we are completing infrastructure projects under right across the board at the moment. We have faced enormous increases—cost pressures—that we have been dealing with on an ongoing basis. It has been a very challenging environment and we have had to make very careful decisions along the way in relation to all of those projects. I think we have seen that quite dramatically across our infrastructure portfolio. I will ask Ms Tooley Elliott to respond to the specific details.

**Ms Elliott:** Can I please ask you to repeat that question?

**Dr ROWAN:** There are three contracts with Downer EDI which are listed on the contract disclosure report which were awarded in October 2020. They have now blown by over \$5 million to over \$13 million. That is a 76 per cent increase.

**Ms Elliott:** We have undertaken a comprehensive Advancing Clean Energy Schools program, of which we delivered more than 199,000 solar panels on 912 schools across the state. This was to support air conditioning in our schools. Following a comprehensive procurement process, the department did engage three delivery partners, Downer EDI Engineering, ERM Power Retail and Ecosave, under a prequalified supply arrangement. The arrangement was executed with the relevant partners for each of the seven educational regions. Initially, metropolitan and Darling Downs South-West regions were awarded to ERM Power Retail; South-East and Central Queensland regions were awarded to Ecosave; Far North Queensland, North Queensland and North Coast regions were awarded to Downer EDI Engineering. However, in late 2020 the department and ERM Power Retail agreed that it was best for respective commercial interests to bring an end to ERM's involvement in the ACES program. A subsequent procurement process was undertaken, resulting in Downer EDI Engineering being appointed to deliver the remaining installations in metropolitan and Darling Downs South-West regions schools. Queensland's procurement policy best practice principles have been incorporated into the ACES deed and the department's delivery partners have agreed to the commitment, schedule and the associated reporting obligations.

**Dr ROWAN:** Minister, in October of 2020 during the state election campaign your then chief of staff met with a lobbyist from Anacta Strategies who was acting on behalf of the Downer Group. Were you briefed by your then chief of staff following this meeting and can you advise of the discussions that were held?

**Ms GRACE:** We follow all procedures when it comes to dealing with lobbyists. We ensure that all procedures and whatever it is that we need to do are met. There was nothing there which would bring a conflict of interest. This was an open procurement policy and, as I said, we follow all the procedures and they were met.

**Dr ROWAN:** Do you recall being briefed by your chief of staff?

**Ms GRACE:** I think there might have been a conversation back in 2020 because I see the register of lobbyists that we meet. I am kept informed of all of that. I have nothing of concern in relation to it.

**Dr ROWAN:** There are now 330 contracts between the Department of Education and Downer EDI with a combined value of over \$81 million. Are these contracts a direct result of the active lobbying by Anacta Strategies with your office?

**Ms GRACE:** That is an insulting comment to make, I take umbrage to it, and absolutely not.

**Dr ROWAN:** With reference to page 36 of the capital statement and various Ripley Valley schools, lobbying firm PolicyWonks, which is headed by the Premier's former deputy chief of staff, secured at least nine lobbying meetings with the minister's office and also senior bureaucrats from the Department of Education on behalf of Ripley Projects. What was the purpose of the meetings between PolicyWonks and senior representatives of the Department of Education on behalf of Ripley Projects, a development consortium?

**Mr De'Ath:** I do not believe there have been any meetings with me with PolicyWonks. I will check with the deputy director-general infrastructure if she has any awareness of any such meetings.

**Ms Elliott:** No, I have not had any meetings.

**Dr ROWAN:** You cannot furnish any information to the committee as to what the purpose of the meetings was with the department at all?

**Mr De'Ath:** I am not aware of any meetings.

**Dr ROWAN:** The Queensland Lobbying Register also reveals that Anacta Strategies met with the Minister for Education's office on at least seven occasions on behalf of Watpac Construction which has previously been awarded \$86 million to build schools for Ripley Valley. Can you please outline the department's probity, integrity and conflicts of interest management framework for such lobbying activity?

**Mr De'Ath:** If I can just be incredibly clear on this matter and this line of questioning: there is an absolute separation between the activity of the minister and any meetings she may have with lobbyists and our procurement processes. We follow an absolutely stringent process that is completely separate from any of those activities and I would expect nothing less or anything otherwise. That is how we operate and I could not be clearer on that.

**CHAIR:** Thank you very much for your clarity, Director-General.

**Dr ROWAN:** Anacta Strategies met with your ministerial office on January 4 and 6 of last year on behalf of Aspen Medical. Were you briefed by your chief of staff following these two meetings?

**Ms GRACE:** In relation to any meetings to do with lobbyists, I am aware they have occurred. The level of briefing depends on what was discussed—if I needed to know anything about it. I was not present at those. I have full faith in my staff that when they meet, they meet all requirements, they do it all above board. If there is some implication in the questioning that meeting with a particular lobbyist has been about bringing about something favourable or the ability for some contract, can I just stop you there and say there is absolutely nothing at all that any of us are aware of—they are a completely separate issue. I do not know who gets these contracts before they are even announced. I am told at the same time, generally, as everybody else is. Just let me stop you there. If you have any evidence to the contrary I suggest that you take it to the appropriate areas. Can I tell you and make it unequivocal: we follow all rules to the T and that is how we operate.

**CHAIR:** Thank you, Minister. That was very clear.

**Dr ROWAN:** So nothing to see here, you are saying, Minister, but I want to ask you—

**CHAIR:** Member for Moggill, could you please rephrase that question without that imputation.

**Dr ROWAN:** A week and a half after these meetings your ministerial diary shows that you attended, by teleconference, a Cabinet Budget Review Committee meeting before an estimated \$40 million contract was later awarded on a sole supplier basis to Aspen Medical for the \$220 million Wellcamp facility. I just want you to confirm that any perceived or actual conflicts in relation to any of these meetings with Anacta Strategies were declared and managed according to the ministerial code of conduct with respect to CBRC and cabinet meetings.

**Ms GRACE:** One hundred per cent.

**CHAIR:** Member for Moggill, I will caution you that that line of questioning is becoming very repetitious. Please ask your next question.

**Dr ROWAN:** One final question on this, given you sit on CBRC: when did you find out about the \$2.4 billion cost blowout for train manufacturing?

**Ms GRACE:** It really has nothing to do with my portfolio. I sit on CBRC and the answer is obvious.

**CHAIR:** Thank you, Minister, and that is correct. That is not within the minister's area of responsibility, as you are well aware.

**Dr ROWAN:** I have a question to the director-general with reference to SDS page 11 and staffing. Following last year's estimates, can you now confirm whether you have fully read the Crime and Corruption Commission report which involved former deputy premier Jackie Trad and the previous deputy director-general Jeff Hunt?

**Mr De'Ath:** Yes, I certainly have.

**Dr ROWAN:** Director-General, in addition to the more than \$630,000 in payments that the former deputy director-general received through the course of his suspension, can you please advise whether any additional payments were made to Mr Hunt in the 2022-23 financial year, including salary, leave entitlements or other benefits or payments that he may have been entitled to?

**Mr De'Ath:** It is on the public record that Mr Hunt has resigned from his position with the department and all payments owing under the terms and conditions of his contract have been made.

**Dr ROWAN:** Can I clarify that final figure. Last year it was \$630,704.70. Is that the final figure that was paid to Mr Hunt?

**Mr De'Ath:** The total figure I have in front of me is \$630,704.70.

**Dr ROWAN:** I have a question to the director-general with reference to SDS page 11. The contract disclosure reports reveal that more than \$32 million has been paid to the big four consultancies since 2018. What warrants the expenditure of over \$32 million on private sector consultancies rather than utilising the expertise of our public servants?

**Mr De'Ath:** This department is an over \$18 billion business. I have a particularly strong view, as director-general, about our in-house work, which also aligns of course with the Coaldrake report and our spend on external consultancies. Compared to that over \$18 billion budget, our spend on consultancies actually exceeds my expectations in terms of being lower in terms of our total spend. In the past 2022-23 year, the spend to what you might call the 'big four' firms was just over \$1.275 million.

**Dr ROWAN:** Director-General, a further question: a senior director of Deloitte was a Labor candidate for the federal seat of Brisbane at the 2022 federal election. What specific governance, probity or integrity frameworks were put in place to manage perceived or actual conflicts between the Department of Education and Deloitte during the federal election campaign, particularly given the subsequent awarding of \$7.9 million in contracts following the election?

**Mr De'Ath:** Without any doubt, our procurement and probity processes are incredibly thorough, as I just outlined also in the previous line of questioning. This is an important matter for the department in terms of our integrity as a public service. We are very clear on our processes in relation to anybody who is procuring services or engaging in the work of our department.

**Dr ROWAN:** Just to confirm, there were no specific additional elements that were put in place with respect to this matter?

**Mr De'Ath:** As I have said, we are very clear on our procurement processes and the integrity of those.

**Dr ROWAN:** Director-General, it was reported in the *Courier-Mail* that in 2022 your minister attended a VIP \$700-a-minute VIP cabinet Christmas function that was also attended by the lead partner of Deloitte. In the days immediately following this VIP party, more than \$6.2 million in Department of Education contracts were awarded to Deloitte, including a contract worth more than \$3 million just two days before Christmas. Director-General, did you attend this VIP function?

**CHAIR:** Director-General, I will allow you some latitude in responding to that question.

**Ms GRACE:** It is the cabinet Christmas function.

**Dr ROWAN:** I am just asking the director-general whether he attended.

**Mr De'Ath:** I cannot even recall the function.

**Dr ROWAN:** Director-General, it was confirmed in the *Courier-Mail* that you did attend. Did you speak with the lead partner of Deloitte that evening?

**Mr De'Ath:** I do not recall any conversation with the lead partner of Deloitte.

**Dr ROWAN:** Director-General, I want to follow up again and ask: at this function did you, the minister and the lead partner of Deloitte discuss these impending \$6.2 million contracts—

**CHAIR:** I will pull you up there and ask you to move on to your next question.

**Ms GRACE:** Scrapping the bottom of the barrel.

**Mr LISTER:** Chair, point of order. I think this line of questioning is entirely fit and proper in the public interest. We are talking about—

**CHAIR:** It is repetitive.

**Mr LISTER:** It is not repetitive. It is attempting to receive an answer to a very important question. I ask that the member for Moggill be allowed to proceed with his questions.

**CHAIR:** That is not a point of order. I will ask the member to move on to his next line of questioning.

**Dr ROWAN:** Point of order, Chair. The point of order relates to the awarding of multimillion dollar contracts with the department and clearly the line of questioning is about whether there was any inappropriate discussion of these matters prior to the awarding of the contracts.

**CHAIR:** Your previous question asked about that very same matter and the director-general clearly responded that he did not have a conversation so I will ask you to move on to your next line of questioning. That is not a point of order.

**Dr ROWAN:** On 14 July 2023, and this question is to the Director-General, it was reported that Deloitte admitted to misusing confidential government information on nine occasions last year. Given that, has the Department of Education reviewed its contracts with Deloitte, including the \$8.4 million in contracts awarded last year?

**Mr De'Ath:** I think we are all very aware of the issues around large consultancy firms at the moment and issues in the media. As a result of that I have asked for my department to have a very careful look at and to review all of those contracts and to see if there were any risks for us. At the moment there has been nothing raised with me that would indicate any concern.

**Dr ROWAN:** Director-General, have there been any further contracts with Deloitte awarded following the public disclosure of misuse of confidential information?

**Mr De'Ath:** I am not aware of any but we will check that.

**Dr ROWAN:** This is a question to the director-general again, with reference to SDS pages 10 and 11 and total expenses and staffing. The latest contract disclosure log shows a contract awarded to PricewaterhouseCoopers on 13th January this year. Can you please advise of any additional contracts awarded to PwC after this date and, if so, the value of those contracts?

**Mr De'Ath:** I will check that detail and come back on that during the course of the hearing.

**CHAIR:** Terrific. Thank you very much, Director-General.

**Dr ROWAN:** Director-General, approximately one week after the PwC contract was awarded on 13th January this year, the *Australian Financial Review* reported its first story on the scandal involving PwC partners disclosing sensitive government information to clients. Can you advise of any action you have taken in relation to reviewing the Department of Education's use of this contract and any other PwC services following this *AFR* report?

**Mr De'Ath:** I believe I have already answered the question.

**CHAIR:** I think you have too, Director-General, but please feel free to respond.

**Mr De'Ath:** As I said earlier, those matters have had a high profile in the media. Of course, we are very alert to the issues around those consultancy firms and those issues that relate to each of them, hence my review of all of our contracts and consultancies to check. As at this point, no matters of concern have been raised with me.

**Ms GRACE:** Can I add to that, because I think the government—

**CHAIR:** No, thank you.

**Dr ROWAN:** This is a question to the director-general. The latest public sector workforce profile has shown that the teacher and teacher aide workforce has only increased by 587 full-time equivalent staff, which is only eight per cent of the state government's 2020 election commitment.

**Ms GRACE:** That is net.

**Dr ROWAN:** Will the Department of Education be able to fulfil the state government's 2020 election commitment and hire the remaining 6,742 new teachers and teacher aides by October of next year, as promised?

**Mr De'Ath:** This is an incredible environment that we are operating in and I think, again, there has been a lot of national discourse on the matter of teacher shortages. In Queensland, our

achievements are quite remarkable. The commitment was to employ 6,100 new teachers and 1,100 new teacher aides. As at this point in time, we have employed 4½ thousand full-time equivalent teachers so 73 per cent. We are just over halfway through the term. We have considerably exceeded the teacher aide target. We have 1,700 teacher aides already, which is 150 per cent of the election commitment. That is a remarkable achievement. Can I be very clear in terms of what the department was asked to deliver on, which was a commitment of 6,100 new teachers and 1,100 new teacher aides. That is certainly on track or exceeded.

Again I reiterate that the work that the department has been doing in terms of teacher recruitment in the environment that we are working in nationally is absolutely phenomenal. I am incredibly proud of the work that our people have been doing. Our schools are obviously great places to work in and we are attracting teachers to Queensland. We have some of the best conditions for teachers in the country and the highest paid. It really is quite remarkable what we are achieving in this space at the moment.

**Dr ROWAN:** Chair, can I just clarify something there? In relation to the question on notice No. 17 response, almost 5,700 teachers and teacher aides have left the Department of Education in the past 18 months. With those figures—

**CHAIR:** Member for Moggill, that is a second question. Your question was clearly answered by the director-general. That is not a clarification so we will move on to questions from the government side.

**Mr SULLIVAN:** Minister, with reference to page 3 of the SDS and education infrastructure, can you please update the committee further on the Palaszczuk government's investment in the future of East Brisbane State School? I know you mentioned it briefly in your introduction, but could you expand a bit more, please, in terms of detail?

**Ms GRACE:** As mentioned in my opening remarks, following extensive community consultation, East Brisbane State School will be relocated as a standalone primary school with new state-of-the-art facilities, including a swimming pool. We have not put a swimming pool in a new school now for quite some time, but East Brisbane already has a pool and we do not want to deny them the facility they have had for a long time. It will be on the nearby Coorparoo State Secondary College site. This is an underutilised 11-hectare site which is right next door to the catchment area—and, as we know, catchment areas change regularly—and all we need to do is incorporate that site. It is an incredible site with extensive green space which is a short distance away and is underutilised. It will have safe drop-off zones and capacity for the expected future growth of the East Brisbane State School community. I think there is a bright future for East Brisbane State School on this new site.

The current constrained 1.5-hectare site is bordered by three incredibly busy roads and has limited access to green space. We will invest more than \$100 million in this relocation with new buildings ready to start for the 2026 school year. Currently, years 4, 5 and 6 students will finish their studies at the existing site and younger students will move to the new site. Any catchment changes will not affect existing students or their siblings, and any heritage listed buildings at East Brisbane State School will remain and will be incorporated into the development.

I take this opportunity to thank all community members who took the time to provide a submission online during the consultation phase or who attended a session in person. Around 600 online submissions, paper surveys and emails were received, with over 350 community members and staff attending in-person sessions. The possibility of building the school on other sites was raised during consultation; however, alternative sites were either too small or of the same size—also on busy roads—and would not be ready in time for 2026 or would require compulsory acquisition of multiple local homes and businesses—something that is only possible as a last resort or where no other suitable site is available.

During the consultation the community made it clear that they want safe and convenient active travel routes to be developed, to explore incorporating artefacts and memorabilia in the designs of the new buildings and ensure transport options coincide with outside school care hours and operation. We will be working closely with the school community to deliver all these things and more. I look forward to seeing the final designs being developed. Our commitment to ongoing consultation remains. I have spoken to the East Brisbane State School principal just as I did on the day the Gabba announcement was made. I have met with the P&C on a number of occasions—four I think—and will continue to do so. I have asked my department to contact them. It is confirmed that I am meeting with them tomorrow.

I have also asked my department to speak with the principals at Coorparoo State Secondary College and Brisbane School of Distance Education and work with them on the detailed planning required to enable East Brisbane State School's relocation. As promised, there will be further in-person



and online opportunities for the East Brisbane school community to shape the future of the school. I look forward to working closely with them in the coming months. Current and future students are going to love their new school which will have some absolutely outstanding new facilities. I recently opened South Rock State School at Yarrabilba, which has incredible state-of-the-art facilities. I cannot wait to see what we deliver on the Coorparoo site.

**CHAIR:** Can you update the committee on how the Palaszczuk government's historic, new, free kindergarten initiative will give Queensland kids a great start and support Queensland families facing cost-of-living pressures?

**Ms GRACE:** Chair, thank you for the question. I acknowledge your great advocacy for kindy. I know we have had discussions, together with other members, when Kindy for All was launched this year. I know just how passionate you are about kindy and clearly childhood services in your electorate.

**CHAIR:** A great start.

**Ms GRACE:** I know. I know that you were particularly happy to see funding of \$2.5 million for a new purpose-built state delivered kindergarten facility on Russell Island State School.

**CHAIR:** Indeed I was.

**Ms GRACE:** Fantastic. The building was transported over to the island earlier this year and is now operational—a great addition to the community. We have kindy on Russell Island. It is a great outcome. Free kindy is an historic initiative—one that will have a positive lasting legacy for years to come.

The budget handed down by the Treasurer in June was all about delivering cost-of-living relief for Queenslanders. There is no bigger or better example of that than our announcement of free kindy for all families. From next year every child of kindergarten age will receive 15 hours of kindergarten a week for 40 weeks—a total of 600 hours a year—free of charge, whether they are enrolled at a sessional kindergarten or a kindergarten program in a long day care centre. Of course, the state also has school-based kindy as well.

This is an additional investment of \$645 million over the next four years, bringing the total investment in kindy to over \$2 billion over the next four years. This is a long-term reform that will provide lasting positive results but also provide immediate cost-of-living relief for families feeling the crunch with savings of up to \$4,600 a year. Our announcement of free kindy builds on the back of the great success of Kindy for All that started earlier this year. Kindy for All has done a fantastic job in providing free kindy for around 14,000 children and families this year, but the additional investment in this budget means more than 50,000 additional children will be able to attend kindy for free from 2024 onwards. This includes around 8,000 kids who could be enrolled in kindy each year who are not. We want everyone to experience the great benefits of kindy, so it is time to close the gap.

Parents tell us about the benefits for their children in being able to play, learn, make friends and, above all, have fun. Kindy builds their confidence, communication skills and ability to share and empathise with other kids their age. When I go to these centres, I must admit that I really bemoan the fact that I never went to kindy. Unfortunately, culturally it was not something on my parents' radar, but when I see what the kids play with, the equipment and everything that they have and the experience, I wish I had that experience too, to be honest.

**Mr SULLIVAN:** You have done alright.

**Ms GRACE:** Teachers and school principals tell us firsthand the benefits of kindy they see in helping children make the transition to school, as the research shows. With kindy, we will be able to identify issues early and put in supports. We are going to concentrate on the kindy, prep 1 and 2 years and make sure that we can work with communities, work with outside organisations and have a holistic approach to the child to give them a great start. I want to see those benefits across all families and I do not want cost to be a barrier when it comes to delivering free kindy.

**CHAIR:** Terrific, thanks minister. Were there any other key elements of the kindy program on which you wanted to update the committee?

**Ms GRACE:** Yes, there most certainly are. Our kindy investment also provides support for the expected growth in the numbers by increasing the funds available to the sector to provide a quality kindergarten program for all children no matter their background, abilities or where they are in this state. This includes an investment of an additional \$120 million over four years to attract and retain a quality workforce. There is work we need to do with the sector. They are very excited about this. I am pleased to announce today that this will include a new centre for early childhood learning and development to

support the early childhood workforce, which will be the first of its kind nationally. We will have a centre that will work with these centres to look at staffing and what we need to do to attract and retain staff.

Some \$40 million will be specifically dedicated to getting teachers to kindy services in regional and remote areas—I am looking at the member for Hinchinbrook and obviously the member for Southern Downs—by providing benefits such as relocation expenses and accommodation assistance. Some \$80 million will support a new statewide Queensland-specific workforce strategy that is being co-developed with the early childhood sector to address and respond to those ongoing concerns about attraction and retention across the sector. The successful Kindy Uplift program—this is really where the rubber hits the ground—which provides targeted resources and support to services that need it most will be expanded thanks to a \$20 million boost in the budget, bringing the total Kindy Uplift investment to \$112 million over four years. This means 2,000 services—more than double the current number—will now benefit from programs to support vulnerable and disadvantaged children in five targeted improvement areas, including oral language, communication and physicality. When we find an issue, we will provide, through Kindy Uplift, the support and professional development that is required to give that child the best start.

There is an extra \$15 million to support children with disability and additional needs, taking the total to \$91 million over four years. One of the exciting parts of our expanded support for disability and inclusion is the new Kindergarten Inclusion Service—how we do it, how we can professionally develop and what are best practices we can provide. The Kindergarten Inclusion Service will see the department partner with four specialist organisations—we are excited about this: Down Syndrome Queensland, Autism Queensland, Hear and Say, and Speld Qld. This is all about early identification of needs and ensuring that appropriate supports are put in place which will hold them in good stead for the rest of their schooling life.

These are fantastic investments. I am proud to be part of the Palaszczuk government delivering this to ensure we are providing our kindy kids and educators with all the support they need to make free kindy a great success, starting in 2024. It is very exciting and I am very proud.

**Mr O'ROURKE:** Minister, with reference to page 11 of the SDS and its reference to the refurbishment of school education facilities, could you update the committee on how the Palaszczuk government is upgrading playgrounds and tuckshops across Queensland schools?

**Ms GRACE:** This has been a very popular program. The member knows just how popular our school playground and tuckshop upgrades are. When I opened South Rock school at Yarrabilba I saw their spectacular playgrounds. They are state-of-the-art and terrific. They had a number of the surrounding schools saying, 'Who provided that? Where do I go and how do I get myself one of those?' As part of our initial \$20 million investment in this program 60 schools received funding. Today I was delighted to announce the 90 schools set to benefit from the additional \$29 million allocated in this year's state budget.

I know how pleased the member for Rockhampton is to have five schools—Allenstown, Gracemere, Port Curtis Road and Waraburra state schools plus Rockhampton State High School—receiving playground and tuckshop upgrades through this program. Member for Rockhampton, I specifically mention you because you asked the question. This is an investment of almost \$2 million in the Rockhampton electorate alone. In the Southern Downs electorate four schools will receive playground upgrades: Amiens, Glennie Heights, Inglewood and Wallangarra state schools—an almost \$600,000 investment. We know that some of them look a bit tired. We are going to refresh as many as we can. In the Hinchinbrook electorate, Kennedy State School will receive \$145,000 for a new playground with soft fall and Ingham State School will receive \$150,000 to refurbish its tuckshop. We have deliberately prioritised rural and remote areas, where it is harder for P&Cs to fundraise and where these upgrades are generally needed most.

Including the 90 schools announced today, our now \$49 million playground and tuckshop program will see 150 schools receive funding to improve and upgrade tuckshops and playgrounds. This program has been heavily oversubscribed—an indication of just how important these facilities are in our schools. It has been so popular that I have asked the department—we are working together—to review all remaining eligible applications and look at how we can provide funding. If your school has made an application but has not heard back yet, watch this space. Whether it will be replacing soft-fall surfacing, installing shade cover structures, purchasing catering appliances or equipment or installing stainless steel benches in tuckshops, this program is delivering many of those.

The Palaszczuk government wants to ensure students have tuckshop facilities that can support healthy eating as well as playgrounds that keep our kids active and healthy, especially in the lead-up

to the 2032 Olympic and Paralympic Games. I look forward to making further announcements around this fantastic program in coming months. It is a great program. Thank you, member for Rockhampton, for the question. As I said, we are prioritising those schools that struggle to raise the funds. They will see state-of-the-art playgrounds and tuckshops installed in their schools. We are working through the current \$49 million with hopefully others when we go through a process.

**CHAIR:** I call the member for Hinchinbrook.

**Mr DAMETTO:** My first question is to the director-general. With reference to COVID-19, would the director-general be able to quantify the amount of pay that was deducted from those teachers who returned to work who had to be seen to with disciplinary measures after not complying with the COVID-19 vaccination requirements?

**Mr De'Ath:** I do not believe that I have that number right in front of me.

**Mr DAMETTO:** There was a one-pay-scale deduction for nine months, I believe.

**Mr De'Ath:** Thank you. There were 177 appeals by Department of Education staff made to the QIRC. Some 173 of those discipline appeals remain active. Four discipline appeals have been finalised by the appellant discontinuing, QIRC declining to hear the appeal or a QIRC decision confirming the department's decision. On 7 July this year, in a recent significant decision, a QIRC decision confirmed that the department's disciplinary process and decision-making were sound, in particular that the individual issues and circumstances raised by the employee were appropriately considered and the decision-maker complied with the requirements of the Public Service Act 2008, the discipline directive and the principles of natural justice—a significant finding.

Forty appeals from departmental staff were made to QIRC in relation to suspension without pay decisions. All suspension without pay appeals have been finalised either by discontinuance or a QIRC decision confirming the decision. QIRC has affirmed that the department's processes for suspensions without pay decisions were sound. The department did not terminate the employment of any staff due to noncompliance with the directive. As to the precise figure, I am not able to state an amount until the appeal process is concluded.

**Mr DAMETTO:** During a time when we have a teacher shortage, how many teachers decided to end their contracts or employment with Education Queensland because of this decision?

**Mr De'Ath:** While I will see if we can supply that figure to you, I refer back to the earlier comment about the phenomenal achievements of the department in this environment in terms of the number of teachers we have been able to bring into the system in recent years. It is a significant achievement. In fact, even in the face of our 2021 to 2023 student numbers dropping, our teacher numbers have risen. This is an improvement to ratio.

**Dr ROWAN:** Minister, I need to come back to teacher numbers. At the 2020 state election the government gave a commitment to recruit 6,190 new teachers and 1,139 new teacher aides. That is a total of 7,329. The public sector workforce shows that only 587 have been recruited, so there are still 6,742 to be recruited. Question on notice No. 17 shows that almost 5,700 teachers and teacher aides have left the Department of Education in the last 18 months. How can you say that you are going to fulfil your election commitment?

**Ms GRACE:** I think I remember similar questioning last year. I am just trying to make it perfectly clear that you are, in a way, muddying the waters in relation to this—

**Dr ROWAN:** No, no.

**CHAIR:** Let the minister respond.

**Ms GRACE:**—by trying to extract a net increase. The director-general—

**Dr ROWAN:** That was the government's commitment—a net increase, new teachers.

**CHAIR:** Member for Moggill, the minister is being responsive.

**Ms GRACE:** Give me a chance to respond. That was not the government's commitment, of net—

**Dr ROWAN:** Changing the goalposts.

**Ms GRACE:** No. Read—

**CHAIR:** Member for Moggill and minister. Hold it. That will be enough from this side of the table. Let the minister respond. I remind the minister to use correct titles.

**Ms GRACE:** As the director-general mentioned previously, at 95 per cent Queensland's teacher retention rates are very good. Where we are at the moment in Australia and the world is extraordinary.

I just got back from India, where there are similar issues with regard to teachers. Our vacancy rate is just two per cent for a workforce of incredible numbers. We remain on track to deliver our election commitment to employ a further 6,190 new teachers—I do not know how many times I have to say that—and 1,139 new teacher aides over the next four years, with more than 1,700 new teacher aides and 4,500 new teachers already employed. We have close to 150 aspiring teachers currently going through Turn to Teaching and another 38 in their first year of Trade to Teach. Our new enterprise agreement for Queensland has some of the best conditions in the country, with increased incentives for teachers. Local workforce planning ensures that many school vacancies are identified in advance and filled to avoid disruption. The department continues to work closely to support those teachers.

In relation to the employment of teachers, it was clear that we were going to employ these numbers but that they would be to replace retiring teachers or teachers who had moved for any apparent reason. It was never playing with figures—which is basically all they seem to do—in relation to the commitment, and we are on track to do that. In fact, we have—if I can get that updated figure—around 500 net, but we have fewer students. We have some of the best teacher-to-student ratios in the country. When we came to government we had 14.5 students to one teacher. It is now 13.2. That is an extraordinary turnaround. We have for some period employed thousands of additional teachers, meeting our requirement. At the end of the day, the member is just splitting hairs and trying to ‘fog’ what was done. As I said, when we came to government it was 14.5 students to one teacher. We are now at 13.2 and there are more teachers today for fewer students than we had when we came to government. It is an incredible turnaround in a very difficult market. We are very proud of what we have done, and we are very much on track for meeting our election commitment.

**Dr ROWAN:** There were 7,329 new teachers and teacher aides promised to the people of Queensland. We have also had a loss of 5,700 teachers and teacher aides over the last 18 months, according to question on notice No. 17. I would like to ask the director-general how many first-year teachers leave the Department of Education within 12 months of employment?

**Mr De’Ath:** This is a system that people want to come and work in. As the minister and I have said, the environment is harsh out there in terms of teacher recruitment. As for a precise number about beginning teachers entering or leaving the system, we would have to go and look into that specific number. We are also looking at, and working with, initial teacher education providers around attrition rates in that space. There is a National Teacher Workforce Action Plan. There has been a huge amount of work done, which has been led federally along with states and territories, around all of the matters relating to initial teacher education. I believe that we have incredible supports in place for our beginning teachers around the state. I visit schools on a very regular basis, and I meet with these teachers early in their careers and hear from them about how they are going. I look at the improvements we have made through the EB settlement around their conditions and teacher housing. These people are doing an incredible job out there. If you work off the basis of our attrition rate being 95 per cent across the state across our workforce, you could assume that it could be about five per cent for beginning teachers. I would need to specifically verify that particular part of the workforce.

**Dr ROWAN:** Director-General, with 5,700 teachers and teacher aides leaving over the last 18 months, are exit interviews performed with the staff who leave?

**Mr De’Ath:** Obviously employees may leave for a variety of reasons, including pursuing other opportunities within the education sector, which is quite common for our workforce. The retention figure is around 95 per cent, as I have said. Exit surveys used from 2019 to 2022 have not provided greater detail in relation to employee departure reasons. In 2023 a revised exit survey was launched to baseline and identify workforce departure trends. We got a high response to that—higher than 40 per cent—from teachers separating from the department between January and July 2023.

Notably, the majority of employees would recommend working for the department and would work for the department again. This sentiment was relatively even across regions and roles, for example, classroom teacher and principal. The reasons for leaving were often retirement and pursuing teaching roles with another employer, and 182 teachers from the 1,288 surveyed have since recommenced employment with the department as a teacher. The outcomes of this survey information will be considered within key workforce planning, including our teacher attraction and retention strategies. We closely monitor other employee perspectives such as Working for Queensland and School Opinion Surveys. Family responsibilities are also another feature of reasons for leaving a teaching role.

**Dr ROWAN:** I have a quick follow-up quick question there, Director-General. Is there any data around occupational violence and teacher safety with respect to teachers leaving the system?

**Mr De'Ath:** Can I commence answering this question by saying that, first of all, there is no place in Queensland schools for antisocial, disrespectful, threatening or violent behaviour under any circumstances. It is a position we take firmly. We do not tolerate behaviour that threatens or physically harms our school staff, other students or members of the community. All students have the right to learn and teachers have the right to teach in a safe, supportive and a disciplined school environment. I want to be very clear with the Queensland public on this matter.

The overwhelming majority of our school communities behave respectfully and appropriately every day; let's remember that. They are actively engaged in learning and have positive relationships with their fellow students and teachers. With around 95,000 staff and more than 574,000 students occupying our 1,262 schools, on any given school day there is the potential for a myriad interactions to occur. In the vast majority of instances our communities are tremendously respectful of each other. It is important to note that across our school-based workforce less than one per cent of our teachers have received an accepted WorkCover claim on the basis of assault or occupational violence against them. This is still one per cent too many, but I highlight this to bring context to the scale of the issue and the publicity that it sometimes gets.

Under our Equity and Excellence strategy, maximising student learning is a key priority. The more engaged our teachers and students are in learning, the better our students perform academically and the greater their life opportunities and outcomes. To be engaged in learning our teachers and students need to be safe and to feel safe. Every Queensland state school has access to specialist resources aimed at preventing and eliminating violence and aggression. This is an important issue, and I would like to go into some of that detail.

We continue to rollout in-house psychological first aid training so leaders and staff can support others affected by violence and aggression. When conflict or complex matters arise, we deploy dispute mediators who provide early intervention and mediation support. We deliver tailored capability sessions to enhance the conflict management and de-escalation skills of our people. In regional, rural and remote areas we deploy specific support, including regional wellbeing coordinators who identify staff wellbeing needs, including potential psychosocial hazards, wellbeing action plans and the promotion of positive staff wellbeing. Our extensive range of supports and initiatives are underpinned by our occupational violence prevention strategy and our staff wellbeing framework.

Phase 1 of the Safe and Respectful School Communities campaign—promoting the benefits of acceptable parent/caregiver behaviour and reinforcing the rights of staff to have safe workplaces—has been implemented, with the department currently progressing new campaign material for phase 2 to be rolled out in the coming months. We also commit \$1.4 million each year to an employee assistance program for all our staff and their immediate family members, where they can access a coaching and support service to support them to lead their school community following critical incidents or traumatic events.

We are also investing significantly in supporting students' wellbeing and mental health at school, and this is why we are investing \$107 million over three years in our Student Wellbeing Package. This includes employing up to 464 additional psychologists or similar wellbeing professionals to provide free, direct support at school for students' mild to moderate mental health concerns. Every state primary and secondary school student will have access to support from a wellbeing professional employed through the initiative by June 2024. I could go on. This system is doing so much to support our students and the welfare of our teachers, and we will continue to do precisely that.

**Dr ROWAN:** Minister, I need to come back to teacher numbers. The net increase of teachers should be less than two per cent over four years, when population growth will be around 10 per cent. I want to ask again: how can Queensland parents be reassured that their children will have teachers where they need them?

**Ms GRACE:** It is an important question and we are working on a number of areas in relation to this matter. As has been in the media at a national level, we are looking at initial teacher education programs, we are working with universities, we are working on attraction and retention, and we have a number of programs that we are putting in in relation to the teacher shortage. There is an Australia-wide shortage. There is not one jurisdiction in Australia—I think there is not even one industry in Australia at the moment—that is not screaming out for workers. I do not know what has happened post-COVID, but I have never known of a time when that has happened in both regional and urban areas.

We have a Teacher Rapid Response Team. In 2022 they established a pool of temporary and permanent state school teachers based in South-East Queensland. Remember, we have also come off three atypical COVID years in education. It has been very difficult to introduce new policies and new

programs because we were basically surviving to keep our kids and our teachers in schools, and I think that has been missed at the moment. We have had three atypical years of ensuring every day that anyone who was sick was sent home. We had teachers who were sick. They were three very disruptive years. In spite of that, we have been able to introduce a number of extraordinary programs, including this rapid teacher response, to fill the positions. We have embarked on Turn to Teaching and Trade to Teach. We are now embarking on assistance for teacher aides as well. We have so many skilled teacher aides and we would like to see them as teachers. We are also part of the National Teacher Workforce Action Plan.

We have incentives, benefits and a good enterprise bargaining agreement—one of the best in the country. There is not one thing that you can do to turn this around. It has to be multipronged, and that is exactly what we are doing. Is it tough out there? You bet it is. I would not be participating in all of the programs that we are doing if I did not acknowledge that, but I believe that Queensland is doing a good job in ensuring that we have the qualified teachers that we need in our schools.

On this matter of teacher numbers, can I refer to the time when the LNP were in government—if we want to rewrite history and rewrite commitments. At a time when student numbers were increasing, the LNP did nothing. In fact there were 500 fewer teachers than we needed at the time—

**Mr LISTER:** Chair, point of order on relevance: we are looking at the appropriations, not previous governments.

**Ms GRACE:** It is very relevant. I had a question on rewriting the history in relation to an election commitment—

**Dr ROWAN:** It is 2023.

**Mr LISTER:** Chair, point of order under 118, relevance: we are looking at the appropriations, not the behaviour of previous governments which were eight years ago.

**Ms GRACE:** I notice a bit of a protection racket going on here.

**CHAIR:** Minister, I remind you that is unparliamentary. You need to withdraw that.

**Ms GRACE:** I withdraw. They cut more than 500 teaching positions. That is their record—

**CHAIR:** Minister, I have not ruled on the point of order. Member for Southern Downs, can you restate your point of order please?

**Mr LISTER:** On 118, relevance: we are dealing with the appropriations before us, not the conduct of a government that is eight years in the wilderness.

**CHAIR:** Minister, have you concluded your response?

**Ms GRACE:** I have concluded.

**Mr SULLIVAN:** We remember. My question is to the minister in relation to page 1 of the department's SDS. Can the minister advise how the Palaszczuk government is supporting students to stay engaged and to succeed at school?

**Ms GRACE:** This is a really important question and I thank the member for Stafford for the question. I know we have had conversations about this. The Palaszczuk government is committed to delivering a world-class education system for every child, but we also understand that keeping students engaged, re-engaging them if they disconnect and supporting strong transitions post school is extremely important. This is an important matter that I want to take a bit of time in answering.

We know that adolescence is a tricky and sometimes difficult period. I know with my own schooling, depending on my teacher, I either engaged at 150,000 per cent or disengaged. I can be honest about that. It depended on the level of interest that they held for me. I am sure that kids are like that today as well. We know that some young people face multiple barriers and may require additional support. We also know that we do not want to leave any student behind. For this reason, we have a range of supports in place to make sure students are at school, actively engaged in their learning and achieving positive outcomes.

Our comprehensive support for staff and students includes our \$45 million four-year youth engagement strategy. As part of the strategy, we have \$11.2 million for regional youth engagement services to locate and case manage early school leavers back into education, employment and training. In 2022 these services connected with and supported almost 6,000 young people, including over 2,000 who identified as First Nations students, over 300 young people in care and over 380 involved in the youth justice system. We identify and we go and casework with them one on one. There is \$16.3 million for Link and Launch, which has been so successful and is now operating in 36 locations. It supports

year 12 completers get on an employment or training pathway. Over 90 per cent of participants—which is an incredible outcome—are still engaged in education, training or work 30 months after receiving support from Link and Launch. There is \$600,000 for the implementation of FlexiSpaces. We are looking at this going forward. These alternative learning spaces are currently operating in 52 schools to help support and retain young people in their existing mainstream schooling. This is an area of support that the department is doing further work on, and I hope to come back with more information on that.

There is \$8.3 million for student, child and family connect specialists in each region. This is student, child and family connect. The fabric of the family is so important in our communities. These specialists engage with and help children come to school. They are in each region working with schools and other agencies to support at-risk students.

There are even more initiatives outside of this. We have a \$106 million package delivering hundreds of health and wellbeing professionals, including GPs and psychologists, in our schools. Our new disability resourcing model that we are implementing—it is transitioning at the moment—is supporting an extra 40,000 students with disability each year. I am sure the member for Moggill, Dr Christian Rowan, would attest that if you do not diagnose something it can be the reason why they disengage. That is additional support for 40,000 students.

We have more than 900 specialist staff in schools providing guidance and behaviour support. We have an additional investment of \$8 million to expand our Education Justice Initiative. This has been absolutely unbelievable. Every department talks about this. We will have six extra court liaison officers and eight field officers, bringing this initiative to a total of \$15 million in funding over four years and 26 positions across Queensland. We will have 26 of these officers who engage with students who come before the Childrens Court, and we will work with them to get them back into school and re-engaged or on a path to employment and training. We have alternative learning options for students who require extra support outside of mainstream schooling. We include 15 positive learning centres across the state, and we have our wonderful Queensland Pathways State College with its six campuses.

We have pregnant and parenting programs in three high schools—Ipswich, Deception Bay and Burnside—supporting pregnant and parenting students to complete their education. I find that so important. It lends a lot of support to those young parents. In combination with supports delivered by schools every day, these investments are all about ensuring every young person is supported to attend, engage and succeed at school and then transition to further study or work when they leave school. We know the more engaged students are, the better they perform and the better the opportunities for them.

There are some incredible examples that I come across. One example is a young person in South-East Queensland who had high-risk behaviours and had had contact with youth justice, and was disengaged from education for 18 months. Agencies coming together in a coordinated way through these different programs resulted in greater stability in this student's living arrangements. That is a very important part. Once again, we have to make sure the outside supports the inside of schools. The student was provided other targeted supports. By the middle of the second term this year, this young person had re-engaged in school and now attends consistently and previous challenging behaviours have decreased. We are continuing to support this student to stay engaged and progress in their learning, ultimately transforming their life opportunities. We want every student to stay engaged in learning and realise their full potential.

Thank you for the question. The work we are doing is so important to achieve this. Is it perfect? Probably not. Is there more we can do? We are rolling it out and continuing to implement and upgrade. I discuss regularly with the department about what we are rolling out and there is some further work that we will be working on fairly soon.

**Mr SULLIVAN:** Thank you, Minister, for that comprehensive answer. Congratulations to your department for this really important work. My next question is a bit close to the heart, too, having done the school drop-off this morning. Can the minister update the committee on the support provided to improve student literacy and numeracy and the important work that supports students in our schools?

**Ms GRACE:** I know how important that is. A specific and deliberate focus of equity and excellence strategies are lifting student outcomes—we make no apologies on that—particularly in English and maths. That is why we are investing around \$264 million a year in targeted support for literacy and numeracy in our schools. It is critical that this begins as early as possible, even as early as kindy. With the foundation for strong literacy and numeracy being laid in prep to year 2 and then built in across the phases of schooling. There is some great work being done to provide strong foundations in literacy and numeracy, supporting both teachers and students. There are early-start resources for teachers to monitor student progress from prep, too. The Reading and Writing Centre connects school leaders,

teachers and parents with expert advice and information to support students experiencing reading and writing difficulty disorders, such as dyslexia, which is now an identified part of our transition in the disability support that we are giving. That is why the 40,000 additional students will come in under those supports. There are more than 1,100 specialist learning support staff in schools. There are around 250 speech-language pathologists and other specialist advisers working in our regional offices to support teachers. There is more than 300 staff to support students with English as a second language, including those from refugee backgrounds.

Our new Education Futures Institute, which I know my director-general and the department is very proud of, is turning around the professional development for our staff on how to teach reading. We are going to really concentrate on that, developing our new curriculum resources to support implementations of the revised curriculum to be fully implemented by 2025. Some schools may develop that new curriculum early if they are able to do so, but we have now extended the time to get it right to 2025, together with the Futures Institute, to provide all the training that we need for that strengthened focus it has on phonics and other strategies like that. We had a great meeting in my office just last week, I think it was, where we were looking at how many ways we can improve in this area and provide the support that teachers and students need.

We have seen encouraging results in improvements in A to E report cards in English and maths across all year levels, including for our First Nations students, and this particularly pleasing. We have seen both an increase in the number of students getting C or higher and an increase in the number of students getting an A or B in English and maths. That tells the picture. When we get these results and those figures are fed in and we see increases in those levels, we know that we are starting to make an impact in equity and excellence.

I remind everyone again, we have come through three atypical years of education in this state. In fact, when I was in India, I learnt that the schools in India were shut for 12 months. Not one child went to school for 12 months and the impact it has had on their students, you can only imagine. We were very lucky here, but we were disrupted. There were three atypical years and, in spite of that, we are seeing a turnaround in these areas.

There are fantastic things happening on the ground. At Brighton State School in Sandgate, the efforts of the principal, teachers and support staff have led to significant improvement in students' performance as evidenced in their improvement in their A to E report card results. The success at Brighton State School is attributed to their collaborative teaching approach to literacy and numeracy across the whole school and the professional growth and support provided to the teachers. So, there is not just one thing that makes this happen; it has to be multi-pronged.

Richmond State School in Traeger, a prep to year 10 school, has deliberately focused on creating numerate learners. Principal Elizabeth Mayo has supported her teachers to imbed evidence-based practices, ensuring best practices for students. From the protractor painted on the floor under the tuckshop door to the height charts around the schools, students are continually encouraged to engage in numeracy. Scott Marshall, a secondary mathematics teacher at the school, captures why it is so important in his explanation when he says—

Numeracy is important in high school due to its connection to vocational education and moving into the workforce. We've got students working at the local butcher and local shop and they need numeracy skills to be successful in that transition to work. Having a whole-school approach means we are preparing students for life after school.

As the minister, I am very passionate about this, both at the high school level and in the early stages. There is some great work that we are developing. We are going to use the new curriculum that we have with the review in the best possible way to get that early start. The new NAPLAN framework, which gives us an indication of the students who require further support, will be put into place and we will be doing all we can to support them to get a great start.

**Mr O'ROURKE:** Minister, with reference to page 1 of the SDS will the minister provide an update on the implementation of the Palaszczuk government's new Equity and Excellence education strategy?

**Ms GRACE:** As I said, we have had three atypical years and we now a fantastic ability to implement some of the work that we did during that time in how we can develop a love of learning and acquire the knowledge and skills that will set our kids up for a great future. We know that no two schools and two students are the same, and we want to ensure necessary extra supports are in place for everyone who needs it. This is what drives the Palaszczuk government's new strategy, Equity and Excellence, realising the potential of every student.

Equity and Excellence outlines our vision for a high-performing, modern education system that lifts learning outcomes and leaves no student behind. A targeted set of key priorities and measures are



focusing our efforts under this strategy. They include: Starting strong—a very positive start to school and strong literacy and numeracy in early years of schooling; On track for success—increasing engagement and lifting report card results in junior secondary, particularly in English and maths; and Ready for the future—supporting positive transitions from senior schooling to further education and employment.

The strategy has been rolling out this year and has been very well-received and I am pleased to provide an update on two of its key elements: integrated responses to provide targeted support for students and school communities where it is most needed; and educational leadership and teaching expertise.

One of our integrated response initiatives is our new education precincts model. This involves clusters of schools in a location or precinct that will work together, sharing staffing, facilities, resources and ideas to address common challenges and deliver better outcomes. We are investing \$8 million to design, trial and evaluate this model at 10 locations, and I can announce that Mount Isa and Bundaberg will be the first two trial sites to commence later this year.

We also have a partnerships program. It is an investment of \$74 million over five years to provide additional targeted support for a group of 42 state schools identified as requiring more intensive and specialised responses to complex issues in their communities. The 42 schools include all of our discrete First Nation communities and other schools in predominantly remote parts of the state. Targeted support for the 42 partnership schools under the initiative will include staff retention and attraction initiatives, additional staffing including dedicated First Nations community facilitation officers and revitalised school infrastructure. We want a holistic approach.

In addition, schools will work collaboratively with other agencies—this is about bringing up the needs in their communities—and the school community to co-design responses to the local factors that are affecting wellbeing, engagement and learning outcomes for their students. I know the DG and I are looking forward to hopefully visiting Napranum, Aurukun and Weipa in the coming few weeks. We are organising something there where we can talk about these partnerships and what we need for a coordinated and co-designed approach.

Educational leadership and teaching expertise is central to our strategy. That is why we are making a \$210 million investment over five years in our new Education Futures Institute. We will deliver a flagship professional development program for our school leaders to build their expertise in leadership, curriculum, teaching and learning as well as providing wellbeing programs. The Institute is now up and running and I had the pleasure of being there for one of the first courses, a new two-year program for our beginning principals. They will receive professional development over two years to assist them to transition into a leadership role in their schools and to give them the tools they need to be fantastic leaders as I know they will be.

As we embark on our Equity and Excellence strategy it is fantastic to already see statewide improvements in our outcomes. As I said, when those figures come in and we can see improvements, we want to continue that trend. Thank you for the question.

**Dr ROWAN:** Finally, this is a question to the minister on teachers. I want to confirm that if your 2020 promise was not for additional new teacher numbers, what you are saying to the committee is that your promise was to increase teacher numbers by less than two per cent over this term.

**Ms GRACE:** Our promise was nothing of the sort. You are rewriting history. Our promise was to employ 6,190 teachers and 1,100 additional new teacher aides.

**Dr ROWAN:** New teachers, not teacher aides.

**Ms GRACE:** Well, teachers.

**Dr ROWAN:** Not new teachers?

**Ms GRACE:** We would employ 6,100 full-time equivalent teachers and more than 1,100 full-time equivalent teacher aides.

**Dr ROWAN:** Is that new teachers?

**CHAIR:** Member for Moggill, the minister is being responsive.

**Ms GRACE:** If we are replacing them, they would be new. If we are replacing when someone retires, yes, they would be new. Some of them may be returning teachers. They may have been overseas during COVID unable to come home and some of them have returned. We may have had them on our payroll before, but they are teachers that we require to run our schools. Like I said, we have more teachers with fewer students today than we had when we were first elected.

**Dr ROWAN:** I have a question for the director-general. With reference to SDS page 1, fair and safe workplaces, since 1 January this year have any student disciplinary absence determinations of state school principals been revoked or overturned as a result of contact by the Department of Education staff?

**Mr De'Ath:** I thank the member for the question. I welcome it. There has been an enormous amount of work going on in the space in supporting our schools and I would like to go into some detail on that.

In 2022 there were just over 78,000 SDA incidents in Queensland state schools and that is 6.1 per cent less than in 2021—a significant body of work. This was the lowest number of SDA incidents in the past five years except for 2020 during which students learnt from home for extended periods. SDAs were down across all year levels including prep, declining by over a third. There were 392 fewer incidents—it is important to look at the incident rate—or over 36 per cent less. SDAs for primary school students were down 11.9 per cent whilst secondary were down 3.7 per cent. Those declines are also notable in vulnerable cohorts. Interestingly enough, when you look into this data, substance and misconduct reasons was the only SDA categories to show an increase, and I think we are familiar with the issues around that.

The work that we have been doing in this space is quite phenomenal. There is a core investment of over \$271 million, which equates to approximately 2,032 full-time equivalent staff to provide guidance support, behaviour management and learning support, over \$1.5 million for the Positive Behaviour for Learning program, nearly \$1.7 million in behaviour management grants to regions, \$4.9 million for positive learning centres and over \$4.7 million for youth pathways grants to regions to support youth engagement. In addition, as a key priority—and moving to the member's question—under Equity and Excellence: Realising the Potential of Every Student, the Department of Education is investing \$81 million over five years to maximise learning days for every student. In that work that is where we are highly responsive to the needs of our schools.

We now monitor this SDA data on a daily basis. We know exactly what is happening in any given school on any given day in relation to an SDA being issued. That allows us to make contact with the school to see what additional support they may require to help retain a student in a school. This is very important work, it is significant work and it is contributing to keeping young people engaged in our schools. From time to time there are reviews and under some quite exceptional circumstances a decision may be overturned. I am aware of one.

**Dr ROWAN:** There is at least one instance where you are saying that an SDA determined by a school was overturned by the department. I would like to ask the director-general: in April this year did you convene a meeting of regional directors, assistant regional directors and deputy directors-general as well as the education minister's educational liaison and advise that regional directors had nine weeks to turn around the increasing instances of student disciplinary absences and if they failed, you would 'take a scalp'?

**CHAIR:** Could you repeat the question because that was not clear to me and with a less lengthy preamble please?

**Dr ROWAN:** The director-general has confirmed that there are instances—at least one instance—

**CHAIR:** One instance.

**Dr ROWAN:** I am asking whether a meeting was convened in April where the director-general gave a directive to senior departmental officers that if the instances of student disciplinary absences were not reduced, if they failed, he would 'take a scalp'.

**Mr De'Ath:** I totally refute the suggestion.

**Dr ROWAN:** Director-General, the Queensland Teachers' Union has publicly stated that 'rather than questioning the professional decision-making of QTU members, the department should provide support for behavioural management including resourcing'. What is the department's formal response to this statement, and has any budgetary allocation been made to improve resourcing for behavioural management?

**Mr De'Ath:** I thank the member for the question. I have just gone through at length the investments including the additional \$81 million. Of course we have had extensive conversations with the Queensland Teachers' Union and all matters that relate to their members and the things that are taking place in our schools. This has been an incredible response. In my discussions with the QTU and in the minister's discussions—meetings I have also been in with the minister—and in the latest

information they have just distributed they are incredibly supportive of the approach. They are seeing the investment that is going into schools to assist schools with challenging behaviours with some students and to ensure that, where we can, we engage those students into learning and retain them in learning.

We do not accept under any circumstance, as I mentioned earlier, that acts of aggression or violence would warrant anything other than the astute decision-making of our principals around student disciplinary absence. That is entirely a matter for school principals and we would support them in relation to those decisions.

**Dr ROWAN:** Director-General, in relation to the student behavioural management framework, the Queensland Teachers' Union has issued a directive to its members to refuse instruction and supervision of a specific student at Burpengary State Secondary College. Are you aware of this particular directive and can you advise how many such directives have been issued by the Queensland Teachers' Union relating to students in Queensland schools and specifically what schools?

**Mr De'Ath:** I am aware from time to time of some unrest around issues in schools where students have challenging behaviours and we work through those issues. On every single one of those occasions, we work through issues with the school, our regional staff and with the QTU on occasion, when required. Generally, in my experience, we have had very positive outcomes.

**CHAIR:** Thank you.

**Dr ROWAN:** Minister, are you aware of the QTU threatening industrial action and have you had discussions with the QTU about these matters?

**Ms GRACE:** These are complicated issues. We do not want to identify any particular students. They have rights as well. None of these decisions are taken lightly. Obviously, some staff members may have had concerns and it is the QTU's role to raise those concerns—they have the industrial rights to do that. They are a registered industrial organisation that has the right to raise concerns on their members' behalf. As the director-general said, every time it comes to their attention, or my attention, we ensure the full gamut of support is provided and we can resolve the issue at hand. These are often difficult and complicated issues.

I am aware of various matters that come up from time to time, including the one at Burpengary. There have been other recent issues that have come up and we work extensively with those members—who have industrial rights—and their union. Queensland Teachers' is a registered union that should be representing them. It is a real union representing their members. As the DG said, the department works cooperatively with them in all of these matters for a successful resolution. Can I just say: it is easy to point fingers or assign blame. These are complicated issues. Staff and students have rights and we respect all of those rights and work cooperatively to a satisfactory resolution whenever possible.

**CHAIR:** It now being just after 10.30, the committee will break and we will resume our hearing at 10.45 am.

**Proceedings suspended from 10.31 am to 10.45 am.**



**CHAIR:** Welcome back, everybody. I welcome to the table the member for Clayfield and I believe the member for South Brisbane will be joining us shortly.

**Mr NICHOLLS:** I thank the committee for allowing me to be here. Minister, in 2017, following the death of Tiahleigh Palmer, the government undertook an investigation and received a report called *Keeping Queensland's children more than safe: review of the blue card system*. Are you familiar with that report?

**Ms GRACE:** Does that fall under the department of the Attorney-General?

**Mr NICHOLLS:** It is government-wide. Certainly the portfolio responsibility for blue cards is the Attorney-General and Justice, but the report is a government-wide report.

**Ms GRACE:** Yes, but commissioned by the Attorney-General's department, is my understanding.

**Mr NICHOLLS:** The Queensland Family & Child Commission. Minister, that report made 81 recommendations. Are you aware that only one-third of those recommendations relating to keeping Queensland's children 'more than safe' have been completed?

**CHAIR:** Member for Clayfield, those 81 recommendations would be, by and large, the responsibility of the Department of Justice and Attorney-General. Did you want to point more specifically to those that would be relevant to the Minister for Education?

**Mr NICHOLLS:** Indeed. I am not suggesting that they are, Madam Chair.

**CHAIR:** Thank you.

**Mr NICHOLLS:** I am just saying: 'Is the minister aware of those recommendations?'

**CHAIR:** Is that the question—is the minister aware?

**Ms GRACE:** Are you asking me if I am aware of the report in 2017? Yes, I am aware of the report, and I am aware that we strengthened the blue card system in relation to that report.

**Mr NICHOLLS:** On the basis of that answer, you would be aware that there are 48 recommendations that have not been completed and five recommendations not yet commenced because you have obviously made a statement in relation to blue cards.

**CHAIR:** Member for Clayfield, I will again ask you be specific to those recommendations as they relate to the Minister for Education's portfolio.

**Mr NICHOLLS:** Indeed. The minister's portfolio is responsible for the operation of early childhood education and care. In Queensland, the registration system for early childhood centres is administered by the Queensland regulatory authority being the Department of Education. I am interested in the care of children in childcare centres. The care of children in childcare centres is determined by the applicability and the implementation of blue cards and blue card recommendations.

We have just had, in the last 72 hours, reports of some of the most horrendous crimes I think any of us have heard about, and the minister acknowledged that in her opening speech this morning. My question in relation to that is: with 81 recommendations from that report and two-thirds of those recommendations not being completed some six years later, is there any responsibility on the Palaszczuk Labor government in relation to ensuring our children are kept safe from predators like the one who is alleged to have attacked 91 children—136 rape cases, 110 sexual intercourse cases with children under 10?

**CHAIR:** That will be enough chatter across the table. Member for Clayfield, I have asked you twice. I will ask you one further time to be very specific to the recommendations of that report as they relate to the minister's portfolio. If you cannot be specific to that, then I will ask you to move onto the next question.

**Mr NICHOLLS:** Indeed, Madam Chair. With the minister's portfolio responsibility for the care of children in childcare centres and the responsibility for regulating those childcare centres, my question is: Minister, how can parents have confidence—after six years next month since that report was delivered and the failure to deliver almost two-thirds of those reports—that you and this government are protecting vulnerable children in childcare centres?

**Mr SULLIVAN:** Point of order, Chair: the relevance to the minister's portfolio is scarce at best. The politicisation of the horrendous information that we have all received in the last 72 hours is disgraceful. In terms of what we are doing today, which is the budget inquiry into the education department, I would ask what relevance the horrendous criminal allegations that we have heard in recent days has to the current SDS.

**CHAIR:** I appreciate the member for Stafford's point of order. As the member for Clayfield has already acknowledged, the minister within her opening statement addressed the significant concerns around that heinous act. Minister, I will allow you latitude in how you respond to the member for Clayfield.

**Ms GRACE:** Obviously if there is any indication from those opposite that somehow what has occurred has not appalled us and has been considered horrific throughout the community, he is greatly mistaken—greatly mistaken. This has occurred over a long period of time—since 2007—in a number of jurisdictions and even overseas—horrific. It is the most disgusting thing that I have heard for a long time. What we as the department do in early childhood services is they are regulated under a National Quality Framework. These are national regulations that my department has responsibility for—not what the Attorney-General does and not in relation to blue cards that have worked particularly well, from my understanding, with regard to the operation of blue cards in this state. The National Quality Framework already largely addresses many of the national child safety principles set out in the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. My department administers this and it was a previous LNP national government that ripped away funding where the state had to pick it up—not the state, federal—and we had to—

**Mr LISTER:** Point of order, Chair: I say again, 118(a). The response is not relevant to the appropriation before us and the question is that the appropriation be agreed to, not criticism of a government that is almost 10 years ago.

**CHAIR:** Thank you, member for Southern Downs, but the matter pertinent to the question relates back to 2017. As I said when I invited the minister to respond to that question, I would provide her with some latitude in how she responded. You do not have a point of order, member for Southern Downs.

**Ms GRACE:** This is the National Quality Framework, not state. The previous government was only in for a relatively short period of time. I am referring to the previous federal government.

**Mr NICHOLLS:** So, Minister, in that sense then—

**CHAIR:** No. Member for Clayfield, you will remain silent while the minister is responding.

**Mr NICHOLLS:** I am sorry. I thought the minister had finished.

**Ms GRACE:** No, not at all; nowhere near it. In fact, the state had to pick up the whole \$30-plus million to regulate this industry under the National Quality Framework. A review has been conducted of the National Quality Framework. It identified minor gaps between the child safety principles and the National Quality Framework. These are national frameworks, not state, I might add. I will make that absolutely clear. These gaps will be addressed through updates to the legislation that will come into effect on 1 October and which will strengthen child protection requirements. The Queensland government, led by the Department of Child Safety, Seniors and Disability Services, is looking at options for potential regulation and oversight of child safety standards across Queensland as well as scoping options for a Queensland reportable conduct scheme, and my department works across the state in relation to many of those recommendations.

In addition, in March 2023—this year—the new education minister instigated a national review to further strengthen child safety arrangements and all the ministers agreed with that and that is currently happening. The purpose of the review is to consider how effectively the National Quality Framework—that we pay for and regulate after the former federal government ripped the funding out and left it to the states to pay for the whole amount—interacts with related laws, regulations, standards and practices to ensure a child-safe environment for all children attending approved education and care services. Specifically, the review will identify any additional systemic safeguard needed to support services to protect children, with a focus on reducing harm, abuse and neglect.

In implementing the requirements of my department, the National Quality Framework, we implement them fully in relation to those requirements. There are new ones coming in in October, but the minister brought to the education ministers meeting in March of this year that a review be conducted to go even further. That work has already commenced. My understanding is that we will get updates at the September meeting and December meeting to see how we can further strengthen those. In terms of any issues with child safety that come, we have very strict reporting regulations. The department fulfils that whenever there is an issue. It is the police that do the investigation. Anything that comes to the attention of our schools or childcare centres is reported in accordance with very strong policy guidelines and then the police do their job in investigating—

**Mr NICHOLLS:** But, Minister, it is your—

**CHAIR:** No. Member for Clayfield—

**Mr NICHOLLS:** But, Minister, it is your system.

**CHAIR:** Member for Clayfield—

**Mr NICHOLLS:** It is your system, Minister.

**CHAIR:** Member for Clayfield, I will caution you and I will caution you for the first time. The minister is still responding to your question.

**Mr NICHOLLS:** She is playing out the clock.

**CHAIR:** Cease your interjection.

**Mr NICHOLLS:** She is playing out the clock, Madam Chair.

**CHAIR:** Cease your interjections. You asked the question and you are getting a response. Thank you, Minister.

**Ms GRACE:** I am finished.

**Mr NICHOLLS:** Thanks, Minister. Minister, it is your system. You are the regulator. You spend \$30 million, you just said, administering the system under a framework. Minister, it is your system. It is your system that is under question here and parents in Queensland want to know that children they send to childcare centres regulated by the state—controlled by the state—are safe and yet two-thirds of the recommendations from the blue card review have not been implemented after six years.

**CHAIR:** Member for Clayfield, this is a repeat of your previous question. If you do not have another question, we will move on to the next line.

**Mr NICHOLLS:** Madam Chair, it is a different question because it—

**CHAIR:** Then get to the point of your different question please.

**Mr NICHOLLS:** It is a different question because it incorporates the response that the minister just gave me in relation to the regulation of the system where she has just spent five—

**CHAIR:** You are debating me.

**Ms GRACE:** The regulation of—

**CHAIR:** No. Minister—

**Mr NICHOLLS:** Of the system.

**CHAIR:** Minister, hold on please. Member for Clayfield, you are debating me as the chair. I am asking you to get to the point of your question please.

**Mr NICHOLLS:** On a point of order, Madam Chair: the question is a separate question because it involves asking the minister in relation to the response she has just given in relation to—

**CHAIR:** That is not a point of order, member for Clayfield, and I will ask you to get to the point of your question.

**Mr NICHOLLS:** Madam Chair, how is it not a point of order?

**CHAIR:** Member for Clayfield—

**Mr NICHOLLS:** How is it not a point of order, Madam—

**CHAIR:** Member for Clayfield, if you do not have a question to put, I will move on to government questions.

**Ms GRACE:** Please. I am happy to answer a question.

**CHAIR:** Member for Clayfield, can you please get to the point of your question to the minister?

**Mr NICHOLLS:** Thank you, Madam Chair, and no disrespect to you, Madam Chair. Madam Chair, the point of my question is this: parents of children attending childcare centres in Queensland will be rightfully shocked at what they have heard, and I agree with the minister—

**Ms GRACE:** Absolutely.

**Mr NICHOLLS:**—and I made that abundantly clear. We have all seen some of the worst things that have occurred. In attempting to protect children, though, there are recommendations that have not been implemented after six years. Does the minister accept that implementation of those recommendations would or could assist in—

**CHAIR:** Member for Clayfield—

**Ms GRACE:** But it is not my portfolio.

**Mr NICHOLLS:**—preventing the harm that we have seen to children?

**CHAIR:** Member for Clayfield, point No. 1 is that that is a very lengthy preamble again and point No. 2 is that the question sounds extraordinarily repetitive. Can you please put your question succinctly to the minister that is different from your previous question?

**Mr NICHOLLS:** The last part of my question.

**Ms GRACE:** Okay, and I am happy to answer it. No. 1: I suggest that those questions be put because I cannot verify or deny whether what the member is saying is correct. I do not know whether those issues have not been implemented.

**CHAIR:** I understand they are not part of your portfolio.

**Ms GRACE:** I am not aware of that, so you understand that it is not in my portfolio.

**Mr NICHOLLS:** I am happy to clarify that that is on the government's—

**Ms GRACE:** When it comes to our portfolio—

**CHAIR:** Member for Clayfield, cease your interjection.

**Ms GRACE:** I am not asking you to clarify.

**Mr NICHOLLS:** That is on the government's website this morning.

**CHAIR:** Member for Clayfield, cease your interjections please. Please!

**Mr NICHOLLS:** Indeed.

**CHAIR:** I am asking politely.

**Mr NICHOLLS:** Indeed. Thank you, Madam Chair; I am sorry.

**Ms GRACE:** When it comes to our responsibility, we implement all of the National Quality Framework. We work diligently to do that. It has been reviewed. There are new standards coming in October. The minister has already put another review in relation to this, and I think I read in the paper this morning that the AFP may have let the minister know and consequently all ministers signed on to see if there is any more that we can do in this space.

Remember when it comes to this the blue card system in this state has worked effectively—that was a quote from the Attorney-General recently in the media. And in relation to this, this is a police investigation, where we refer whatever comes our way to police to investigate. It is not the job of my department to investigate matters in this area. We regulate the childcare centres to ensure safe systems of work—that centres have the right staff ratio. There are a number on the National Quality Framework—not a state, a national quality framework—and we implement those diligently. We pay for all of that and we will continue to work federally to do what we can. We will do what we can. We will leave no stone unturned if there is something that we can do to ensure this never happens again—hand on heart. If anyone thinks for one second that if there is something that we can do that we will not do, I can assure them that we will do what we need to do. Any suggestion to the contrary is insulting and purely playing politics.

**CHAIR:** I think everybody in this room feels sick to the stomach with what they have seen in the last 72 hours. Before I ask the member for Clayfield for his next question, I welcome the students in the gallery who join us today for estimates. Thank you for being here.

**Mr NICHOLLS:** Thank you, Madam Chair, and I thank the minister for her answers.

**Dr ROWAN:** Returning to student disciplinary absences, can I ask what processes are in place to ensure the ongoing provision of education to students who are subject to industrial action by the Queensland Teachers' Union?

**Ms GRACE:** Who is the question to?

**Dr ROWAN:** To the director-general.

**CHAIR:** Would you like the question repeated?

**Mr De'Ath:** Yes, please.

**Dr ROWAN:** What processes are in place to ensure the ongoing provision of education to students who are subject to industrial action by the Queensland Teachers' Union?

**Mr De'Ath:** There is a variety of circumstances that could exist in relation to what you are raising. If you had a specific example that may be helpful, but providing education for students as their right is something that we do as a matter of course.

**Dr ROWAN:** To give the director-general a specific example, it is in relation to Burpengary State Secondary College where a student was suspended, the department overrode the suspension decision, which then led to the Queensland Teachers' Union issuing an industrial directive to their members not to teach the student. I want to know what happens to that student. Are they taught in the school or are they still excluded from the school? What provision for ongoing education is provided to such students?

**CHAIR:** Director-General, we are getting into the specifics of one individual and I would caution anybody, in responding, to appreciate the relevant standing order as it relates to children.

**Mr De'Ath:** Thank you, Chair, I was about to make that exact point: that getting into the specifics and identifying specific students is not something that I would engage in.

**Mr LISTER:** Point of order, Chair. Under 117 I believe that the restriction on the naming of children is not being crossed here because we are talking about a matter that has already been raised in public.

**CHAIR:** It is not just the naming, it is the potential identification of that student. Again, Director-General, if you do not feel comfortable with responding to that for that reason, I accept that response. Member for Moggill, please move to your next question.

**Dr ROWAN:** With reference to SDS page 1, fair and safe work places, I understand there has been a Supreme Court decision that knives are to be allowed in schools for religious purposes, that to not do so would be a breach of the Racial Discrimination Act. There will be Queensland parents who

will be rightly concerned. Can I ask the director-general how this is going to be managed in Queensland schools?

**Mr De'Ath:** I have only just been made aware of this finding and the department is currently considering how it will respond to that.

**Dr ROWAN:** After the determination of those decisions will there be consideration by the government minister in relation to an appeal?

**Ms GRACE:** I think it is a good question. It is one that the Court of Appeal has just handed down. I understand that it is to do with the federal Racial Discrimination Act and there was inconsistency and so it was upheld. Obviously we do not want to see knives in our schools, there is no doubt about it, but I can understand it is for religious reasons. This comes under the Weapons Act. It is not really my legislation; this is under the Weapons Act. We have not had a chance to speak with the Police Commissioner who oversees that piece of legislation. We have not had a chance to analyse the decision to see if there is a way that we can fix this up. We have to take into consideration now the immediate impacts of that and we are obviously here in estimates and we will do that as soon as possible, member. But obviously we want to have a look at the full gamut of that. I want to work with the various ministers who authorise this because I understand that the prohibition on knives in schools comes under the Weapons Act of Queensland. How that may or may not be modified, member, I do not know at this stage. We do not know the intricacies. We may need to get some advice in relation to that, whether or not we can stay the decision until we work out exactly what that means for our schools, but the Court of Appeal has spoken. We need to look at that and we need to look at it in a balanced and proper way and we need to determine a way forward. We have not had an opportunity to do that. It has only just been in the media today. But I can assure Queenslanders and the whole school community that we will take a very close look at the implications of that and I will work across government and with other ministers to have a look at it. That is all I can really say at this point in time.

**CHAIR:** We will move on to government questions now. With reference to page 2 of the SDS and its reference to the new and upgraded school sport infrastructure, could the minister advise how the \$100 million Go for Gold Fund will increase student activity and participation in sport across Queensland schools?

**Ms GRACE:** I thank the member for the question. I know how pleased she is that five schools in the Redlands electorate have received \$4,000 for sporting equipment in the first round of our program. For Redland Bay there was high jump equipment; Macleay Island various sporting equipment; Redland District Special School received \$3,000 for fitness equipment, which I thought was wonderful for the Redland District Special School; Russell Island State School received \$5,000 for active play equipment; and Victoria Point received \$5,000 for soccer goalposts. These little things in the first round was exactly what we wanted. We wanted to give schools the equipment that they needed to be able to participate actively.

Round 1 has been very successful, with 680 schools receiving around \$2.5 million in funding for sporting equipment. This funding was distributed to state and non-state schools—so it is for all schools in Queensland: city and country, regional and remote. I was lucky to visit Parramatta State School during our Cairns sitting of parliament in May to see firsthand the school's netball facilities. The children were playing on the court and I know how much they were looking forward to receiving their new netball goalposts for the netball academy that they run there—an investment of \$5,000 under Go for Gold. Schools right across Queensland received funding—around \$400,000 in Central Queensland; 81 for Darling Downs and South-West schools; \$285,000 to schools in Far North Queensland; and 421 for schools in the North Coast region.

Queensland's Olympians and Paralympians of tomorrow will not only have access to the latest sporting equipment, but world-class infrastructure thanks to our \$100 million Go for Gold investment. Round 2 is now open for both state and non-state schools to apply for up to \$5 million for new or upgraded sports infrastructure. This is a huge investment. I was at Ballymore yesterday and a lot of the people at that lunch were talking about the Olympic and Paralympic Games and how to get kids involved. They were so impressed with the \$100 million Go for Gold funding. This could include oval upgrades, multipurpose facility upgrades, synthetic pitches to facilitate athletics and field sports. We are waiting for applications to come in. I am advised there is a high interest in round 2. Applications remain open until the end of term 3, which is 15 September. We are waiting on those applications to come in. We know that active kids are happy kids and we want to get more kids active and give them the opportunity to become future Olympians and Paralympians—and obviously get extra gold medals for Australia at the 2032 games. As I have previously said, applications for round 2 close at the end of



term 3 and we will again prioritise our regional and remote schools where opportunities for fundraising are limited. These larger infrastructure projects are due for completion by the end of 2025. We want to get it in as quickly as we can.

It is an exciting program. It creates jobs in the regions because as well as upgrading those facilities we will be upgrading their playgrounds and tuckshops. We are looking at those facilities as well. It is good news for students, good news for tradies and good news for Australia's medal tally at the 2032 games. It is an exciting project.

**Mr O'ROURKE:** My question is of the minister. With reference to page 2 of the SDS, can the minister advise how the Palaszczuk government is continuing to invest in quality teachers to set Queensland students up for a great future?

**Ms GRACE:** Every day our teachers and teacher aides are making a difference to the lives of Queensland students. They truly are the foundation of the world-class education system we have in Queensland, setting up our kids for a great future. That is why the Palaszczuk Labor government put thousands more in our classrooms. When it comes to the number of teachers and teacher aides in our schools, unfortunately, some members have attempted to mislead once again so here are the facts.

There are nearly 6,000 extra teachers and 1,500 extra teacher aides in our schools since 2015 and that is all net growth. That is net growth in the number of teachers since we have been elected. There has continued to be net growth over the past few years, even as the number of students has decreased. That means student-to-teacher ratios have continued to improve and, as I recently said, they are now 13.2 compared to 14.5 when we were elected. That is an extraordinary turnaround under the current circumstances and during three atypical years due to COVID—an extraordinary effort.

In 2020 we made our Great Teachers, Great Future commitment. That was a commitment to employ 6,190 FTE teachers and 1,139 FTE new teacher aides by the end of 2024. As at March 2023, we have hired over 4,500 FTE new teachers and more than 1,700 new teacher aides, so passing our teacher aide commitment. I want to be crystal-clear: this commitment was both to replace those who retire or take up other roles and to ensure we are providing the net increase in the particular areas of Queensland experiencing growth. As I said, since we made that commitment in 2020 we have seen enrolments in our schools fall during the atypical years of the pandemic and, I believe, low birth rates at the same time compared to previous years. Even as the number of students has decreased from 578,100 in 2020 to 574,489 in 2023, which is a reduction of just under 4,000, we have continued to see net growth. As at March 2023, there are 621 extra FTE teachers compared to March 2020. As a result, student-teacher ratios have continued to improve, which is extraordinarily important.

We have several great programs in place to help with this. The \$20 million Turn to Teaching Internship Program commitment to employ and support 300 aspiring teachers to complete a teaching qualification and undertake paid internship employment with a guaranteed permanent position in a Queensland school at the end is well underway. Thirty-nine interns from the 2022 intake are now teaching in Queensland schools as part of the second year of the two-year program. A further 104 participants from this year's intake are currently undertaking their postgraduate study as part of their first year. Expressions of interest for 2024 are now open. Meanwhile, we were experiencing difficulty in getting trade teachers in schools, which is something I was hearing all over the state. We have 38 interns in our Trade to Teach Internship Program currently in the first year of their initial teacher education.

We have incentives under our enterprise bargaining agreement. We are working nationally on a teacher workforce action plan. We have some of the best conditions for teachers. We are providing incentives for teachers to go into our regions and remote areas. There is a number of programs that we are also enhancing, which I might be able to address later on today. Thank you, member for Rockhampton, for the question.

**CHAIR:** I welcome some more students into the gallery to watch and observe estimates. Welcome.

**Mr O'ROURKE:** My question is to the minister. In regards to the SDS at page 3 and teacher housing, could you inform the committee on how the Palaszczuk government is investing in safe and secure teacher housing in regional and remote locations?

**Ms GRACE:** With an over \$10 billion investment in education infrastructure since 2015, we have seen new halls, classrooms, buildings and 25 new schools constructed right across Queensland. We stand proudly on our record of delivering world-class facilities and, do not forget, we air conditioned every classroom, library and staffroom across the state by April 2022, on budget and ahead of time.

Our incredible record of infrastructure commitment also extends to our teaching, ensuring we attract and retain teachers to deliver world-class education to students in our rural and remote areas. Housing assistance is available for eligible teachers through a combination of both government owned properties and rented properties. That has always been the case. Even though government employee housing is a responsibility of the Department of Energy and Public Works, we know that we all have to do our bit. This budget has allocated \$48 million for the acquisition and renewal of housing in rural and remote areas, so it is specifically for additional acquisitions. This will take our total spend this financial year on housing, which includes maintenance, improvements, acquisition of properties and leasing, to an over \$76 million investment so that we can provide the housing that is required for our teachers in regional and remote areas.

Currently, we have around 3,000 places for teachers to live, which is 300 more than we had in 2019. That is made up of government employee houses that come under the Department of Energy and Public Works. They have about 1,504. The ones owned by us are normally on school properties so that we cannot transfer them to GEH. We look after them. There are around 500 of those—499 to be precise, but I am sure there might be one that we will find so I will say around 500—and 815 leased from private owners so that when teachers are transferred they do not have to look for a home. They are there, they are leased, they can move in and it makes it easier for that transition.

In extremely remote areas where both housing and land is limited, we are providing solutions. A two-bedroom prefabricated house at Kilcummin in the Burdekin electorate is currently in the planning stage. That is a very remote area. We now have some housing that we are looking at bringing in. We are doing that under this program. Two one-bedroom prefab houses on Saibai Island—I visited Saibai in the Torres Strait, in the electorate of Cook—are at lock-up stage. We are about to transition teachers into brand-new facilities on Saibai, which I might say is closer to PNG than to Queensland. A three-bedroom prefab house at Croydon in the electorate of Traeger is currently in the planning stage. We realised we need a bigger place to attract teachers to that area and we are looking at that.

This investment now will see us obviously provide housing assistance and support to teachers right across the state. It means teachers transferred to eligible rural areas such as Roma, where I was recently, Mount Isa—and every area is having a housing issue; it is quite extraordinary—who may otherwise lease property directly with the private market do not have to spend the time and money associated with doing that. We have them ready for the teachers to go. I think that is a great departmental policy. We take that headache from the teachers. The department providing teachers with subsidised accommodation that is ready to move into is yet another way we are supporting teachers to take up these roles.

We work with QBuild to deliver the housing. My understanding is that there is a half a billion dollar package that will build an additional 439 homes. We have almost 100 of those homes identified for my department in 36 rural and remote locations. They will be delivered through the Government Employee Housing scheme. They will deliver those and we will deliver the ones that are on our school land under the scheme for teachers. As well, there is \$11 million that we will be investing out of that \$48 million in acquisitions this financial year. That is roughly the figure.

Speaking of the Torres Strait, my colleague Minister de Brenni has pointed out that the Palaszczuk government is building as many new homes for frontline workers on Thursday Island alone as the LNP built across the whole state during their term of government. We back our teachers and our frontline workers. We always have and we always will.

**Mr DAMETTO:** My question to the minister is with regard to rural and remote communities that go without high schools. What support is the state government giving to those students who wish to stay within their communities to complete grade 7 or their education after that?

**Ms GRACE:** It is one of those difficult areas because with high school the pedagogy says you need the numbers to provide students with an excellent high school experience and education in terms of the subjects and VET in school. We do have P to 10 schools in a lot of these areas in recognition that some student may want to stay in their community for years 7, 8, 9 and 10. Obviously, if they want to go further, they go to a high school. We continually look at that, member for Hinchinbrook. It is hard because you do want to give kids a good start with high school. If you keep them in a primary school, the transition might become a little bit difficult. I do not know whether there are many parents who do not want their child to experience high school when they are at the age to experience it. The department looks at these issues.

I am looking at P to 12 and what we do with those. I think we have a number of P to 12 schools right throughout Queensland. We keep reviewing whether we go to P to 12 in those communities. Do

we cut them back and then ensure that these students start in a high school which may not be too far away? We have not settled on anything like that yet, member for Hinchinbrook, but I am well aware that, as ministers, we want to provide students with the best education and ensure that we can accommodate all their needs.

I have spoken to members on both sides of the House about the P to 10 schools in their areas and whether they should remain. We are looking at this; we look at it all the time. I am always conscious that you need that volume of students to give them the full gamut of a very good high school experience. I do not know the pedagogy around keeping a year 7 student in a primary school longer than is absolutely necessary is the right way to go, but, obviously, we keep looking at this, member for Hinchinbrook. I am happy to speak with you about any issues you may have. We always work with our department on how we can deliver it in the regions. I will ask the director-general to comment because I know that we have had discussions about this on many occasions.

**Mr De'Ath:** This is an issue—the minister is absolutely correct—that we continue to examine on a very regular basis. We often hear from communities looking at how they could get extra provision into those senior years. There is a real trade-off here in terms of what quality we can bring to some of those often quite isolated communities as opposed to the travel that the students may have to undertake to access their schooling. There is, of course, the School of Distance Education which does make some very good provision.

Under Equity and Excellence, we have now launched the virtual academy. The virtual academy is about ensuring that our students, no matter where they are in the state at a school setting, can get equitable access to high-quality, expert teaching, particularly around STEM subjects. If someone is here and they have to travel, at least we can ensure them that they will get access to the physics teacher or the biology teacher exactly where they have to attend and that we are not having substitute teachers who do not bring that expertise. It is a very important piece of work and it is about ensuring equitable access to high-quality provision, particularly in those senior years.

**Mr DAMETTO:** My second question is in regards to a question I asked on notice which was not completely answered but which the minister answered in a media release this morning—\$5 million is being allocated to combat vaping in Queensland schools. It is one of the issues parents come to my office about. On a more granular level, can you explain how that will be distributed throughout Queensland schools and what the programs will look like—infrastructure upgrades and those sorts of things—to combat vaping in Queensland schools?

**Ms GRACE:** We do have a program where we have linked with Griffith University, which I believe also works with the University of Queensland. There is \$5 million for that. We cannot do this alone. I appreciate the federal government doing work in this area and we have a parliamentary committee looking at this too. If there is vaping in the community, it will come into our schools. If there are cigarettes in the community, they will come into our schools. Even though it is banned in all schools—I can ban it until the cows come home—unfortunately there are students bringing it into our schools. It is just like when I went to school. Cigarettes were bought in even though we knew that they were banned. As the committee would know, smoking—including vaping—is currently banned in all schools. We recently passed legislation to strengthen tobacco laws and increase smoke-free places, which now includes school car parks as well. We do not hide from the fact that we have school nurses.

The department has been working with the University of Queensland National Centre for Youth Substance Use Research. Today I can announce that the Palaszczuk government is investing \$5 million over three years to provide secondary schools' access to what is called the Blurred Minds program. This means that all Queensland secondary schools, state and non-state, will be able to access the online interactive program. This has been developed to teach kids in a way that they directly relate to. I have been into classrooms now that use virtual mask in learning. There was some great work being done in a classroom recently. They will be able to access this online and interactively in a way that they can relate to and work with to hopefully get the message across to them.

The Blurred Minds Academy is housed at Griffith University and includes 13 online modules mapped into the curriculum. It will help educate students in an engaging way about the risks associated with drug use—because it is substance and vaping—and this includes special modules about vaping and health, vaping deception, and vaping and the environment. It is a comprehensive plan and we are investing \$5 million into it. Students who have completed the program showed an increased capability to say 'no' to vaping, felt more informed, increased their knowledge about the dangers and showed a reduction in vaping use. If we can get those outcomes, that would be great.

Teachers said it increased their knowledge and they realised that some of the material has not been out there and a lot of things are misleading. They said it made their teaching more effective. Some 85 per cent said the academy improved their teaching experience. Schools will have access to Blurred Minds from the start of term 4 this year. We are looking at how we implement that. As I said, it will be consistent. It will be a statewide approach, regardless of the schooling sector. We are going to invest in it for all schools. It is a community-wide health concern. This demonstrates our commitment. It might be that students have to do this program to educate themselves about the dangers of vaping. It is a broad public health issue, as I said. We cannot do it alone; just like schools would not have been able to eliminate smoking alone. That took a huge national and state response to reduce the numbers. When I went to school I think about 50 per cent of people smoked and now I think that number is down to single digits. That took a national approach—not just schools alone. We will play our part. We are doing all we can in concert with others to tackle the scourge of vaping.

Thank you for the question. It is exciting that we are linking with the universities. There is \$5 million starting from next term for a delivery mode that I think students relate to. Hopefully we will learn from the outcomes so far in relation to it. There is no doubt it is an issue. It is very concerning. I was at the Bundaberg races last weekend and was concerned that most of the group of young people in front of us were vaping, which was very sad to see. They were not school age of course; they were adult young people. Vaping was happening amongst them, and I looked in despair to be honest.

**CHAIR:** Thank you, minister. We note that the committee is doing a big body of work on that very topic.

**Mr DAMETTO:** All the best to the minister and the department on this one, because 10 years ago at least you could smell a cigarette on a child. You cannot smell a vape.

**Ms GRACE:** True, I know and way they hide them too. It is non-stop. With a cigarette, it burned out and you had to relight, but with vaping—

**CHAIR:** Thank you for the rundown, Minister. Member for Moggill, I am sure you appreciate it.

**Dr ROWAN:** Director-General, from 2015 to 2022, suspensions and exclusions due to substance misconduct rose by 190 per cent to a total of 8,654 instances. That figure was given in response to parliamentary question on notice No. 26 this year. How many of the 8,654 suspensions and exclusions last year were attributable to vaping or vaping products?

**Mr De'Ath:** It is complex in terms of things being measured together in terms of substance misuse.

**CHAIR:** I understand it is specific to vaping.

**Dr ROWAN:** I specifically wanted to get a breakdown of those instances by substance type and how many were attributable to vaping in the data that is measured.

**Mr De'Ath:** I will take some advice on that for the member.

**CHAIR:** It is a tricky one to disseminate, I can appreciate.

**Ms GRACE:** I think the way it is grouped—

**Mr De'Ath:** I do not think we can do it.

**Ms GRACE:** It is broader.

**CHAIR:** We will wait for you to come back at the end of this session.

**Dr ROWAN:** I heard the director-general say that he is not sure they do actually group it. I just want to clarify that.

**CHAIR:** He just said that he is going to come back to clarify that response.

**Mr De'Ath:** I can provide some information. In 2021, students were suspended or excluded for drug related incidents—including for legal substances such as tobacco, vaping and medication—7,514 times. As at 15 November 2022, students were suspended or excluded for drug related incidents—including for legal substances such as tobacco, vaping and medication—7,873 times. It is important to note that the number of incidents does not reflect the number of students engaging in these behaviours as some students can be represented in the data more than once.

**Dr ROWAN:** Director-General, the last two years of Service Delivery Statements for the department revealed that not a single outcome target was met across years 3, 5, 7 and 9 for the proportion of students either at or above the national minimum standards and with Indigenous students' results even worse. Why are Queensland students failing to meet the benchmarks that have been set?

**Mr De'Ath:** The Department of Education is committed to providing the very best education to every student in Queensland state schools and is committed to improvement. I will speak to some of that quite significant improvement throughout the course of this response. The targets in 2022-23 set high expectations for schools to focus efforts on ensuring all students realise and are progressing in their learning. Overall, Queensland student performance held in 2022, despite the three years of COVID-19 disruptions, thanks to the hard work of staff, parents and carers in supporting students during a challenging time.

The approach to NAPLAN targets in the SDS was established when NAPLAN first commenced. They have always set high expectations for schools about student achievement in literacy and numeracy across all jurisdictions. Literacy and numeracy, as we talked about earlier, are foundational skills, and NAPLAN targets are set against what was the—it is now defunct—national minimum standard and should be read in conjunction with other NAPLAN data, which does show a broad improvement trajectory since testing commenced overall.

There are noted concerns that the department will no longer report on student outcomes on NAPLAN in future budgets. That is incorrect. I make that clear. There are new proficiency levels being introduced in 2023 nationally, and the way in which NAPLAN outcomes are reported at the student, school and system level will be different. That means that the department will now undertake review and analysis and consult with stakeholders and central agencies to determine the most appropriate measures to use in reporting on performance through the state budget next year.

When we are running off NAPLAN data—as I say, for very good reasons about issues with how NAPLAN was operating and moving to something that will be more helpful into the future—it is that snapshot in time. Queensland leads the nation in terms of our assessment processes. That shows that we value our teachers and we rely on those teacher judgements and our A-E report card system. It is very sophisticated, and our data metrics and analytics around that we have taken to a new level of sophistication—particularly when we look at, for example, moderation processes. We can see where a school is rating harsher or more generously against a particular standard on the A-E, and then we can go and work with them about bringing those a little closer and refining those judgements. For me, when my children were at school I always valued what I heard from the teacher who was interacting with them every day.

Last year on our A-E data, for all students and for Indigenous, we saw a rise in every single metric. These are green shoots, but it is very difficult to achieve that in an education system. I want to pay tribute to our teachers and principals who did that work. They did an amazing job, as we emerged from COVID—talking to them about the very fact that we wanted to lift the outcomes of our students beyond where we were. Already this year we are seeing further growth. That is really exciting to see. That is the work that our teachers do every day, and we value that work as a system. It is sophisticated. We support our schools where we see that they need extra assistance with it. Quite frankly, as a director-general presiding over a large system, it is great to have that sort of information as opposed to a one hit wonder annually.

**Mr O'ROURKE:** I refer to page 2 of the SDS. Can the minister provide details of the new and expanded scholarships and grants for aspiring teachers?

**Ms GRACE:** I can. I will never say a bad word about teaching. It is a wonderful profession. We want to continue to attract a wide range of people to it, from all walks of life. Teachers can change children's lives, and many have. If we can think of a teacher we loved, it is because they inspired us, taught us and gave us the tools we needed for where we are today.

In addition to some of our flagship programs, like Turn to Teaching, the department each year offers a number of scholarships, bursaries and grants to support aspiring teachers to take that step. Today I announce a range of new and expanded ways in which we are doing that for the start of the 2024 school year. One of these is the new supported pathway into teaching program for our teacher aides. Teacher aides are often the lifeblood of our schools. Many are wanting to take the next step to teaching, and we absolutely want to encourage and support that. When I go to discrete communities I learn that most of the teacher aides are First Nations people. They do an amazing job and often have many years of experience.

Time and study commitment to undertake their initial teaching education can sometimes be a barrier. Our new supported pathway program, starting next year, will address these barriers. Eligible teacher aides in Queensland state schools who are doing their teaching degree will receive special leave with pay to undertake exams and compulsory practical placements. There will be central department funding for schools to meet the cost of backfilling positions while teacher aides are away

as part of their study and there will be offer of permanent employment upon registration as a teacher in a Queensland state school as a priority location.

While the full program starts next year, to make sure teacher aides who are already studying to be teachers are not disadvantaged I can confirm that they will be eligible for the special leave with pay to do their prac, for any compulsory practical placements, from the start of term 3 this year. For those who are already studying, that part of the program will commence. We know how difficult it is.

We will also be expanding current initiatives. The number of Aspiring Teacher Grants will be doubled, from 25 to 50. This grant provides a one-off payment for high-achieving year 12 students to commence an initial teacher education program—\$2,500 for general applications or \$5,500 for rural and remote students. We want to get our high-achieving year 12 students into teaching.

Regional, rural and remote graduate teacher scholarships provide up to \$15,000 and permanent employment for graduate preservice teachers to work in regional, rural and remote state schools. They will be increased. We have 72 at the moment. We will increase that to 100. The number of Pearl Duncan Teaching Scholarships for aspiring and preservice First Nation teachers will be increased from 20 to 30, and the value of the scholarship will be doubled—up to a total value of \$40,000 over four years. We really want to start to attract more First Nation teachers.

As a result of these improvements, the investment in teaching scholarships and grants will double from just over \$1.3 million this year to \$2.8 million in 2024, supporting 180 future Queensland teachers. This is great news for aspiring teachers. I encourage anyone thinking about a teaching career to take the step and do so. If they need any extra motivation, we have a number of students studying under these different grants, bursaries and scholarships. Jessica is currently studying for her Bachelor of Education (Primary) at James Cook University. With the assistance of the Pearl Duncan Teaching Scholarship, her goal and dream is to complete her degree, relocate to a remote community to teach and one day become a principal. I wish her all the very best. She feels honoured to be awarded the scholarship because Pearl Duncan inspires her. It will allow her to purchase a laptop, textbooks, stationery supplies—all of the resources she needs to help her achieve her degree. She said—

I love working ahead and studying on my days off. Having my own laptop will be handy for me to study any time. It will also assist me with gaining a permanent position in a state school upon completion of my degree.

She further stated—

I am definitely looking forward to helping make a difference in children's lives. My daughter is my biggest motivation. I am doing this for her too. To be able to provide the life for her she deserves, to show her that you can achieve anything if you work hard for it. I am teaching her how to live a healthy lifestyle and how to be successful in life.

As we often say, you cannot be what you cannot see. I am sure that her child will see a very effective teacher in the years to come.

There are many more testimonials I could give you, but I think these are exciting. I am glad that we are more than doubling the amount of money. I look forward to meeting some of these teachers on my travels.

**CHAIR:** I am cognisant of the time. We have four minutes left to run in this session. I note there were two questions you were hoping to come back to and there was a clarification before we went to the break. I do not think I came back to ask what that clarification was. I am not sure if you want to cover that now or if you want to wait.

**Mr De'Ath:** I am happy to cover that now, Chair. The first matter relates to a question I was asked in relation to a meeting with PolicyWonks as lobbyists. I apologise for not recalling them under that label. I remember them more as Ener-G. I met with Kirby Anderson from PolicyWonks and Ken Ash, the director of Ener-G, on 21 October. They met with me in my role as the director-general, government champion for the community of Yarrabah, to discuss with me the micro-grid project proposal that is progressing. Kirby disclosed at the beginning of the discussion that he is a registered lobbyist and that Ken consulted for him. Ken spoke to a presentation of the project outline and provided an update on where the project is currently at, and I provided some information about the role of the government champion. That is my file note.

**CHAIR:** Thank you very much. The other matter was in relation to the COVID vaccination mandate and further contracts with Deloitte and PwC.

**Mr De'Ath:** With Deloitte there have been no new contracts signed since 14 July 2023. With PwC there have been two contracts signed since 13 January 2023: one was implementation of the Infrastructure Services Division major projects portfolio management office and contract management,

which was signed 27 March this year; the second was a GST analytical tool, and that was signed on 10 May this year.

**CHAIR:** I think the last one related to the number of teachers who decided to end their contracts because of the vaccine mandate.

**Mr De'Ath:** In 2022, 128 teachers resigned following the initiation of the COVID vaccination mandate and subsequent to the cessation of that mandate. These teachers were identified as non-vaccinated or 'non-response to advice request'; for example, voluntary resignation and not terminated. We do not have a broader dataset at hand for all occupations. That would take quite some time.

**CHAIR:** Thank you very much. Member for Stafford, there are two minutes left.


**Mr SULLIVAN:** My question is to the minister but also very quickly to the director-general. Following up on your comments about NAPLAN, one of our kids is in year 5 and the personal experience of our family is that bringing it forward in the year to inform teaching has been effective. I think it is a good initiative. With my dad hat on, I say thank you to the minister for that. With my MP hat on, can the minister please update the committee about the Palaszczuk government's school halls building initiative, including in regional Queensland.

**Ms GRACE:** This is exciting. Everywhere I go I see the new multipurpose facility halls, and they are extraordinary. They are right across Queensland. I know how excited the member is about the Wilston State School community—it used to be in my electorate but it is not anymore—and its new hall. It is one of 37 we committed to at the 2020 election. We stand proud on delivering this. In this budget \$259 million has been provided for 2023-24. Our investment in school halls will be over \$700 million since 2015. Eighteen of the 37 halls we committed to are now being built in regional Queensland, including: Warwick State High School in Southern Downs—which is a fantastic one; St George in Warrego; Ayr in Burdekin; Oakey State High School in Condamine; and Chinchilla State High School in Warrego. Can I tell you that everyone is jealous of the one in Chinchilla. When I was in Roma they were all talking about the Chinchilla hall. Everybody wants to get one.

There are many more. I was thrilled to open the new sports hall—with the member for Burleigh, I might add—at the Palm Beach Currumbin State High School last week. This is a \$12 million state-of-the-art investment. These are not school halls; they are almost stadiums. I think they call them sports centres, stadiums, that kind of thing. We are on track with almost 20 more halls this year, including: a multipurpose hall at Beenleigh State High School in Macalister; a new multipurpose hall at Chandler—I have seen that, it is nearly finished, it is an incredible multipurpose hall—in Buderim; and the new sports hall at Miami State High School. As I mentioned earlier, \$259 million. We are delivering this. This is great for the area. These facilities are state-of-the-art. They are fantastic.

**CHAIR:** That concludes the committee's consideration of estimates for the education portfolio. Thank you, Director-General, for that further information. The committee will now adjourn for a break. The hearing will resume at 12.30 to consider the estimates for the racing portfolio.

**Proceedings suspended from 11.46 am to 12.30 pm.**

 **CHAIR:** The hearing is resumed. Welcome back, Minister and officials. The committee will now examine the estimates for the racing portfolio area until 1 pm. For this segment of the hearing, I welcome the director-general and officers from the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries. I call the member for Everton.

**Mr MANDER:** Minister, my questions are going to be directed to QRIC. I just noticed the commissioner is not here. Is that unusual?

**Ms GRACE:** The QRIC commissioner is on leave. There was a very special occasion and he spoke to me extensively about it. We are in the very good hands of our acting commissioner at the moment.

**Mr MANDER:** Acting Commissioner, how many swab samples from animals did QRIC collect across the three codes last financial year, and how did that compare to the previous financial year?

**Ms Conner:** We typically try to sample about 21,000 samples per year. The year just gone, we actually sampled 20,882 samples and that is from Queensland. We also do samples from other jurisdictions.

**Mr MANDER:** How does that compare to the previous 12 months?

**Ms Conner:** I do not believe I have the figure for the previous 12 months, but it would be very similar to that. I can get that for you.

**CHAIR:** And come back before the end of the session?

**Ms Conner:** Yes.

**Mr MANDER:** That would be great. How many of those from last year would have been pre-race samples?

**Ms Conner:** That is quite a specific answer that I am not able to give right now. I do have those figures though and I can get them for you.

**Mr MANDER:** Thank you. On a similar theme, how many of those showed a positive result?

**Ms Conner:** I have that one. That is 75 samples, which is 0.36 per cent. I do have the previous year for that one as well, and that was 56 in the previous year.

**Mr MANDER:** Is it correct that pre-race swabbing numbers have been reduced to six per meeting across the state and the codes?

**Ms Conner:** When it comes to swabbing, we have a strategy that we use and it is not as cut and dried as that. It is based on intelligence, the seriousness of the race and the amount of prize money on there. We do out-of-competition testing, we also do pre-race testing and then we do swabbing based on our swabbing strategy. It is not just a set amount. For example, with the recent Stradbroke series, we did a very large number of pre-race. However, at a normal metropolitan meeting, we may not do any, we may do six or we may do 10. It really does depend on the race, any intelligence that we have and decisions around form and previous information we might have around horses and dogs.

**Mr MANDER:** So you would not have a minimum amount per meeting? It is simply based on whatever intelligence you might have.

**Ms Conner:** Absolutely; that is correct. There is no minimum amount. From our perspective, we like to make sure we are using our resources to their best use, so we do tend to use intelligence to make that decision. I do have that figure for you for last year, if you like. That was 21,823 sealed kits last year.

**CHAIR:** Is that 2021-22?

**Ms Conner:** That is right. The sealed kits mean it was a successful swab that was then received by the laboratory. We send out kits. There are enough kits to have an average amount of races. If there is not the same amount of races, then all of those kits are returned and unused. We like to talk about the ones that were received by the laboratory and able to be tested. There are some that, when they are received, might have come open or our sample collection officers may not have sealed them correctly and we cannot test those. There is a small portion of those.

**Mr MANDER:** If I am comparing the two financial years, is that like for like? So it is the same procedure that was used both years.

**Ms Conner:** Exactly. That is correct.

**Mr MANDER:** So there has been a slight decrease.

**Ms Conner:** A slight decrease in the number of tests. However, not all tests are equal as well. For example, when we do hair testing and we want to do TCO2 testing, we have to close down the entire laboratory to do that. The effort that has been applied is basically the same, but the number of tests are different because we will choose whether or not we need to do a TCO2 or some other sort of test. Again, that is based on intel. You talked about positives earlier; we also keep a database around animals that had a dear threshold. A positive means it is above the threshold and able to be confirmed by the laboratory as being abnormal and therefore a confirmed positive. However, when we have under threshold, we keep that data as well and that might form the basis for us making a decision to do a TCO2 test versus another test of some sort.

**Mr MANDER:** I have further questions to the acting commissioner on a different subject. How many full-time equivalent staff does QRIC currently employ?

**Ms Conner:** At the moment our full-time equivalent cap is 176.

**Mr MANDER:** And how does that compare to the previous financial year?

**Ms Conner:** Last year it was 175.

**Mr MANDER:** I am led to believe that a number of senior staff have left the services of QRIC in recent times. They include the general manager of racing North Queensland, the thoroughbred deputy chief steward of North Queensland, the manager of the Greyhound Adoption Program, the QRIC senior



counsel, the chief vet, the chief thoroughbred steward and the director of racing, licensing and registration. Is that true and is there a common reason behind those departures?

**Ms Conner:** It is true but there is no common reason. Our attrition rate is about 24.6 per cent. Most businesses at the moment are around 20 per cent, so it is a little higher than average. For most of those, there are individual reasons. Unfortunately, in Queensland our salaries are not as high as overseas or down south so people get better jobs elsewhere and we encourage them to do that. Some people had some personal matters; they had to return back to family. Some people were unable to do the work that we needed them to do. There are a bunch of reasons but they are all recent resignations that we have had.

**Mr MANDER:** Just looking at some of those positions, that looks like a lot of experience and expertise that has been lost. Would you agree with that? Has that been a big loss to the intelligence of the organisation?

**Ms Conner:** What we find at the moment is that it is very hard to get good people and have those people stay. I think that is consistent across most businesses in Australia at the moment. We certainly are constantly advertising. Racing is not a job that people can do often all the time. It is antisocial hours, it is long hours, it is frontline work and sometimes it does not quite match people's expectations. I think that is just a factor of the role.

**Mr MANDER:** Who does the HR role? Is it done internally or do you have consultants?

**Ms Conner:** We have a manager of HR and we also use CAA to do some of our processing.

**Mr MANDER:** I could not find this, which does not mean it may not exist—a consultancy log or a list of consultants. I could not find that anywhere. Does that exist?

**Ms Conner:** We do not have any consultancies at the moment. We have quite a few labour hire contractors in the organisation; we always have. A lot of our veterinarians are contractors across the state.

**Mr MANDER:** That is what I meant, sorry. I used the wrong term. Are they listed anywhere? I have not been able to find them.

**Ms Conner:** We would not list individual contractors anywhere, no.

**Mr MANDER:** The value of contracts?

**Ms Conner:** Labour hire would be the value of the job, so it would depend. For example, if it is an administration officer, it might be about \$40,000, \$55,000. Typically veterinarians are by the day, so we have a variety of fees for that. For some of them, probably over the life of hiring that person it would be reasonably high. We certainly have a project at the moment to try to equalise the amount we are paying all of our veterinarians. It is varied based on the role.

**Mr MANDER:** I would not mind finding out, if it is possible, whether the contractor information is available. With most of the other agencies, it is all available on open data. I looked for it last financial year and it just had two, a \$90,000 contract and a \$2,000 contract. Sorry, it was the previous financial year. I could not find anything for this one. I would be interested to know that information.

**Ms Conner:** I have been talking about labour hire. The contractors themselves would be on the standard—

**Mr MANDER:** HR firms, legal firms—surely you must contract those type of groups?

**Ms Conner:** We do not, no. We would use legal as required and they are usually one-off. They are not very large because it is for a particular matter. I can give you the exact amounts for our contractor expenditure. In total, it is \$3.488 million, and that includes things such as CAA costs. We also use an area of DAF called ITP that a lot of departments use. That is all included within there. I can give you a breakdown of the various expenditure for—

**Mr MANDER:** What are the two highest figures?

**Ms Conner:** What is the most expensive?

**Mr MANDER:** Yes.

**Ms Conner:** Veterinarians.

**Mr MANDER:** What amount is that?

**Ms Conner:** That one is \$896,000. Sorry, last year—I will give you the estimated actual—\$565,000. That is everything, obviously, from Cooktown to Cunnamulla and everywhere in between.

We have very few veterinarians whom we can actually engage full-time, unfortunately. We advertise regularly and often get nobody, so we use local veterinarians across the state. As you can appreciate, a race cannot happen unless there is a veterinarian present.

**Mr MANDER:** I am conscious of time. I will switch over to Racing Queensland. Mr Scott, the issue of the shortage of jockeys in rural areas was raised a couple of years ago with your predecessor. Somebody notified me recently and said that a number of scratchings occurred across regional and rural meets in places like Roma, Mount Isa, Home Hill, Rockhampton, Injune and Longreach, totalling 41 in June, largely due to a jockey shortage. Your predecessor said two years ago they were aware of that and things were under control. Do you know if, one, this is a real issue and, secondly, what measures have been put in place to address that issue?

**Mr Scott:** It certainly is a real issue and it is an issue outside of the regions as well. I think we will find with every employee in the community, regardless of where they work, their working conditions have probably improved since COVID and working from home; jockeys, not so much. I think every sportsperson turns up to their main event day, Saturday, well-nourished, perfect hydration, fit to go; jockeys, not so much. This is the problem. Jockeys turn up thirsty, losing weight and wasting. This is the problem we have with attracting people to being a jockey. Racing Queensland is now funding jockeys to move them out to the regions. We have organised a deal with Hong Kong to have apprentice jockeys over here for six- and nine-month periods. I am not sure if you are aware, but Singapore racing will be closed down at the end of this year, and we are speaking to Singapore about potential options. The other matter is I think we need to move the limits up so that jockeys can ride at a higher weight so that it is more attractive to people and more people are able to be jockeys or we are not going to be able to kill it. For instance, we do not have many three-kilo-claiming apprentices in Brisbane. It is not an attractive career path for young people.

**CHAIR:** Sorry, how many kilos was that?

**Mr Scott:** Three kilos. They are jockeys that get a three-kilo advantage: they can ride at three kilos heavier basically while they are learning. As they ride more winners, that claim decreases. Right now, a young lady, Angela Jones, rode out her claim and she was the last one we had in South-East Queensland. It is a challenge and we need to work at it.

**Mr MANDER:** Just to educate me, when you said that what should be done is lifting the weights, what is required for that to occur?

**Mr Scott:** It is something that I identified. I have only been in the role for three months. I am currently in consultation with the jockeys' groups. We need to get the majority of jockeys on board, so it is probably something we will see in the next four to six weeks.

**Mr DAMETTO:** My question is in regards to country racing and how many country racing events in the last 12 months were cancelled due to track condition? Subsequently, off the back of that question is how much money will be invested in country racing in Queensland to ensure that does not happen again?

**Ms GRACE:** We are very much supporting country racing. We have legislated now under the new funding a sustainable model that country racing will be funded with indexation happening every year to the tune of \$20 million-plus per annum. That is going to really sustain country racing. We acknowledge that it is a fundamental part of the community. I love going out to the meets. I have recently been to Roma, Gordonvale and Bundaberg, and they were terrific meets. It is very good to have that. The racing industry, obviously, has grown. Investment in country thoroughbred racing has certainly grown over the period of time. The investment in prize money and jockey racing fees total about \$24.5 million now in 2022-23, which is very much an increase from what it was before. Some \$13.7 million of that is in total prize money and total spend from 1 December 2022 to the commencement of the betting tax to 30 June was \$13.3 million. The new sustainable funding is certainly helping it. Did you ask the number of meets that were cancelled due to track condition?

**Mr DAMETTO:** Yes.

**Ms GRACE:** There are some pockets where the track condition has been difficult. I know that we have worked with a couple of the racetracks to get them done. I will refer to Jason Scott. He seems to have some figures for you, member for Hinchinbrook, in relation to that. We are working with some race clubs to up their track. Bundaberg was terrific; we just did a new surface for their track. I know there was one recently around the Charleville area.

**Mr Scott:** Charleville and Charters Towers

**Ms GRACE:** Charleville and Charters Towers, and I think they are about to be done.

**Mr Scott:** Last year we lost 36 race meetings in total, nine were TAB and 27 were non-TAB which will be the country areas. I do not have the breakup of how many of those were impacted by weather. For instance, the meet at Cairns on Saturday has already been cancelled.

**Ms GRACE:** Babinda was cancelled when I was up there, too.

**Mr DAMETTO:** I get that; weather can play into that.

**Ms GRACE:** That was weather. With these tracks when the weather comes they cannot run. In terms of tracks, there were those two, member for Hinchinbrook.

**Mr Scott:** Yes.

**Ms GRACE:** I am pleased to say we have one of those well and truly starting. They are very happy at the regional council level as well. It was just the terrain, but Bundy looked fantastic with the new track that was laid there.

**Mr O'ROURKE:** My question is to the minister. With reference to page 2 of the SDS, can the minister provide an update on how the new sustainable funding model for racing is supporting the industry and in particular country racing?

**Ms GRACE:** The industry is just so thankful for this. Our new sustainable model began on 1 December 2022 and the changes include an increase in the betting tax with a five per cent levy and broadening it to include free and bonus bets. It also saw an increase, from 35 per cent to 80 per cent, of the proportion of betting tax revenue returned to racing. This is delivering certainty to the industry and allows all wagering service providers to compete on a level playing field.

In 2021-22 more than \$54 million in betting tax revenue was returned to Racing Queensland. I can advise that in 2022-23 that was more than \$108 million. That is double the amount of betting tax revenue that was reinvested back into the Queensland racing industry. Of that, over \$82 million was returned following the December 2022 changes. We are seeing that now. Can they be sustained? That is for the industry to work on. However, from all the reports that I received from those in the industry, Queensland is thriving and they all have their eyes on what is happening up here. With more funding flowing to RQ it could grow the pie further, and its announcement of an extra \$31 million in prize money in 2023 demonstrates that. It is an incredible increase when you think about it.

The new sustainable funding model also expands upon the Palaszczuk government's strong commitment to country racing; I thank the member for that question. The model replaces our former country racing program, which invested almost \$106 million over six years with a legislated minimum funding amount of \$20 million each year which will be indexed annually. We support country racing in this state because of the economic and social benefits to the local area.

In the past few weeks, as I said, it was great to be out at Roma, Bundaberg and Gordonvale, which is why I am pleased to announce 39 clubs will receive grants to deliver a total of 51 projects through Racing Queensland's new \$3 million country club asset funding. This new funding stream, which is part of RQ's broader support for country racing, has more money on offer to assist country racing clubs with assets and infrastructure than was previously available through the former country racing program. Some examples are \$285,000 for stable facility upgrades at, of all places, Julia Creek Turf Club in Traeger and \$220,000 for a stewards and jockey building upgrade at the Emerald Jockey Club. Can I say the upgrades are generally to incorporate female change rooms and facilities. We have an excellent program of female jockeys. If there is any growth in the numbers, it is our female jockeys who are our apprentices through our registered training organisation. Let me tell you the winner of the Bundaberg Cup was a female jockey, and congratulations to her. She is a young 20-year-old woman who had a fantastic ride.

There is also \$131,000 for new barriers at Gladstone Turf Club and the list goes on. It is not an exaggeration to say that racing is thriving at the moment. As I said, there was the independent assessment by IER, and there has been 83 per cent growth since we were elected. It is now a \$2.2 billion industry. Total wagering turnover for all three codes in 2022-23 was almost \$6.7 billion compared to just \$3.5 billion in 2015 when we came to government. I will repeat that: \$6.7 billion last year compared to \$3.5 billion when we were elected.

In 2022-23 RQ provided over \$243 million in prize money and breeding schemes. That is nearly double the \$129 million available when we came to government in 2015-16. It has been an extraordinary turnaround and it did not happen by accident. We put in place the vision and all the changes that were needed to get the confidence of the public, the confidence of the industry and the confidence in our processes that we implement. I am very proud to be the racing minister in

Queensland. I can confidently say that under our government the best is yet to come for racing, particularly with the new facilities that are on the drawing board.

**Mr SULLIVAN:** My question is of the minister. In relation to page 2 of the department's SDS can the minister please outline the implementation and operation of the new Queensland Racing Appeals Panel?

**Ms GRACE:** This is one of the things in the vision that we wanted to make sure we could streamline. When we made the original changes there were issues in relation to the QCAT process. We sat down with industry, we listened to them, we worked with them and I am very glad about where we landed. The new Racing Appeals Panel commenced operation on 31 March. I say thank you to QRIC for the work they did with us, and RQ did some work as well in relation to setting it up and understanding how it all works. It replaced the previous internal review system under the Queensland Racing Integrity Commission and external appeals to QCAT in relation to racing stewards' decisions that imposed penalties or took disciplinary or exclusionary action.

The legislation is now in place. The industry wanted a system that allowed for a review of a decision to be undertaken in a similar way to other professionals. I think at the time—and the member for Everton may remember—we based it upon some of the football codes where they go to the tribunal and the decision is made quickly. They determine what happened rather than the other way around.

**Mr SULLIVAN:** As opposed to people waiting and kind of gaming it?

**Ms GRACE:** Yes, trying to game it and all of that. We went through all of that during the debate in the House.

**Mr MANDER:** I would not use Rugby League as a model.

**Ms GRACE:** No, maybe not. It is those rectangular games type of appeal tribunal. I am very pleased with the calibre of the panel that has been appointed, which is currently 15 members. They are led by the inaugural chair, Kerry O'Brien AM, who is a former chief judge of the District Court of Queensland. I thank him for taking on the position. We also have two fantastic deputy chairs, Dianne Condon and Peter O'Neill. The panel has already made some high-profile decisions and have collectively demonstrated they have the expertise and agility to meet the statutory time frames required. From the panel's commencement, I can advise there were 18 applications received for the review of stewards' decisions and the panel had finalised 17 of those matters. All appeals were heard with prompt statutory time frames set out in the Racing Integrity Act.

I am very pleased it has been well received. Cameron Partington from the Australian Trainers Association was quoted as saying—

The first experience with the RAP was certainly a breath of fresh air ... The online process was seamless and efficient, and the registrar team were both very helpful and available, and were able to understand and appreciate the importance and urgency of the situation.

For the first case for the RAP, the industry is more than impressed with process and it's a vast improvement on the previous system.

I could not have said it better myself.

**Mr O'ROURKE:** My question is of the minister. In reference to page 1 of the SDS, can the minister provide an update on the progress of major racing infrastructure projects that are currently underway in Queensland and how they will support a vibrant racing industry once completed?

**Ms GRACE:** I will do this quickly; I am conscious of time. I know that the Rockhampton Jockey Club received \$2.3 million. I visited recently with the member, and their new facilities are going to be fantastic. That club has just gone from strength to strength. Obviously a lot of this includes expansion and refurbishment particularly of the male and female facilities. As I said, the country racing package is doing great.

We have started work on the Q, which is the new greyhound track out at Purga. It will be a world-class stadium. We met recently with the CEO, Jason Scott, who talked about how this is going to be world leading. We will have animal welfare at the heart of what we are building. It is currently underway and the Q will be a terrific new facility with, as I said, animal welfare at its heart.

We are also looking at harness racing. We have that amount of money being spent on the Gold Coast. How exciting is that for the Magic Millions and what is happening there? We also have a 72-hectare site at Norwell for harness racing. We will need to move from Albion Park due to the Olympic and Paralympic Games and we have that in our sights. Every club is receiving finances, upgrades and safety rails. It is a very good news story.

There will be new lights for Redcliffe Harness Racing Club. I went out there recently and I was appalled at the state of the lights. I am pleased to say we are going to get new lights at Redcliffe. They will probably take a lot of the load when we will have to get Norwell ready for harness racing. I look forward to keep handing out infrastructure, and there is a great package in the budget.

**Mr O'ROURKE:** Thank you, Minister. The investment into Callaghan Park has been very well received by our community; it is wonderful to see.

**Ms GRACE:** I know.

**CHAIR:** I know that you take a keen interest in the racing, like the member for Hinchinbrook. Our time has now expired for this session on racing, so we will do a quick changeover for our next session on industrial relations. I thank all of the officers from the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries for joining us for that session.

**CHAIR:** Welcome back, Minister and officials. The committee will now examine estimates for the industrial relations portfolio area until 2 pm. The question before the committee is—

That the proposed expenditure be agreed to.

I welcome to the table the member for Kawana. The member for Maiwar will be joining us shortly.

**Mr BLEIJIE:** May I call the WorkCover CEO please?

**Ms GRACE:** The WorkCover CEO unfortunately is an apology today, but we do have David Heley from WorkCover.

**Mr BLEIJIE:** Mr Heley, can you outline the services that Mr Matthew Kratiuk from Executive Performance Partners is providing to WorkCover Queensland?

**Mr Heley:** Executive Performance Partners have been doing some coaching work with WorkCover Queensland over the last 12 months. I am unsure of who that particular individual is doing coaching with, but he has undertaken a presentation to WorkCover leaders.

**Mr BLEIJIE:** Thank you.

**CHAIR:** Order, member for Kawana. It has been brought to my attention that, in terms of schedule 7, Mr Heley is not listed to respond to the questions. The minister will need to direct those questions to you.

**Mr BLEIJIE:** Minister, if you are happy for me to keep asking the Acting CEO of WorkCover—

**Mr LISTER:** On a point of order: did the gentleman not say he was the acting CEO when he took the table and, therefore, that questions can go directly?

**CHAIR:** That is correct, but WorkCover Queensland is not on the schedule.

**Ms GRACE:** I am happy to direct questions to the acting CEO.

**CHAIR:** Thank you, Minister. Thank you, member for Kawana.

**Mr BLEIJIE:** Through the minister to the Acting CEO of WorkCover, can you please advise how much money has been paid to Mr Kratiuk or Executive Performance Partners to date?

**Mr Heley:** I cannot be exactly sure how much we paid that individual, so I would have to find that information out, but we pay Executive Performance Partners for executive coaching during the course of the year. To really understand what an individual gets paid through that contract, I would be unsure.

**Mr BLEIJIE:** Can we have the figure, though, of how much the contract is worth and how much has been paid?

**CHAIR:** Minister, are you happy to use this session to try and find out more information?

**Ms GRACE:** Yes, I am member for Kawana. Hopefully we can have that for you by the end of the session.

**Mr BLEIJIE:** Thank you.

**Ms GRACE:** If WorkCover could please get that information, if possible.

**CHAIR:** Thank you.

**Mr BLEIJIE:** The acting CEO has advised that Executive Performance Partners has been providing services to WorkCover in a coaching capacity for the last 12 months. I have been contacted by a concerned WorkCover employee who advises that case managers and claim assessors were given a presentation by Mr Kratiuk, who Mr Bruce Watson, the CEO, described at the time as having

'an exceptional ability to inspire and engage'. Given that Mr Kratiuk has been described in 2015 as an 'outlaw bikie gang standover man known for fraud, drug peddling and a drug addict'; is that correct?

**Ms GRACE:** I am happy for the acting CEO to answer, but I do not know the veracity of the allegations being raised here.

**CHAIR:** Can you substantiate those allegations, member for Kawana, outside of a media release?

**Mr BLEIJIE:** This is a *Sydney Morning Herald* article which has quoted Mr Kratiuk himself as a former drug addict.

**CHAIR:** They have quoted him, or Mr Kratiuk quoted himself—who quoted?

**Mr BLEIJIE:** The man I am speaking about. The former druggo, kingpin, bikie, standover man.

**CHAIR:** I just asked who was the quote from; I did not need you to lead into that.

**Mr BLEIJIE:** On a point of order: when you are asking for verification, I am relying on an article which I have here.

**CHAIR:** I asked you who the quote was from. That is not a point of order, member for Kawana. Minister, would you like Mr Heley to respond to that question?

**Ms GRACE:** It is up to Mr Heley as to whether he is able to respond.

**CHAIR:** Mr Heley, I will provide you with some latitude. You may not be aware of that *Sydney Morning Herald* article.

**Mr Heley:** I was not aware of that person's background prior to speaking.

**Mr BLEIJIE:** The article that I quoted was an article with respect to Mr Kratiuk where he says he is a reformed person. I suspect that may be why WorkCover engaged his services in the last 12 months. Are you aware that Mr Kratiuk was in court only last year where he pleaded guilty to assault occasioning bodily harm following an drunken incident in Fortitude Valley.

**Ms GRACE:** I am happy for the acting CEO to respond to that question.

**Mr Heley:** No, I am not aware.

**Mr BLEIJIE:** I note that Mr Kratiuk is promoting his association with WorkCover on LinkedIn. Did WorkCover authorise this promotion?

**Ms GRACE:** I am happy for Mr Heley to answer.

**Mr Heley:** No, I am not aware of any authorisation of that, but I would still need to check whether that took place.

**Mr BLEIJIE:** I refer to another article dated 15 August in 2022—only last year—2022 in the *Courier-Mail* where it is advised that Mr Kratiuk, who pleaded guilty to assault occasioning bodily harm in a public place while intoxicated, was sentenced by magistrate Suzette Coates. He was sentenced to 12 months jail with a parole release date of 24 August. That was on 25 July last year. His parole then started a month later. The concerned WorkCover employees have advised—

**CHAIR:** That is a lengthy preamble; could you get to the point of the question, please.

**Mr BLEIJIE:** In order for the witness to properly answer this, he needs to be armed with the facts, Madam Chair.

**CHAIR:** The person that you are directing the question to may not even be responding to that question. It is through the minister, so if you could get to the point of your question, please.

**Mr BLEIJIE:** Thank you. I would have loved the CEO of WorkCover to be here to answer the questions, but he is not, so I am dealing with what I have, Madam Chair. The magistrate sentenced Mr Kratiuk for 12 months. I am advised that the presentation given to WorkCover was in the week of 23 June this year, which would mean he delivered a presentation while on parole; is that correct?

**Ms GRACE:** I am happy for the acting CEO to respond in accordance with his knowledge. This questioning seems to be continuing along the same vein in relation to this individual, but I will allow the acting CEO to respond.

**Mr Heley:** I am totally unaware of the individual's background or anything that transpired prior to that presentation.

**Mr BLEIJIE:** Through the minister Mr Heley, can Mr Heley commit to getting back to the committee whether he was in fact on parole when he gave a presentation to motivate WorkCover staff?

**Ms GRACE:** I honestly do not know whether or not that is something that WorkCover is going to be able to establish. Clearly—

**Mr BLEIJIE:** There is a public document.

**Ms GRACE:**—Mr Heley has made it—

**CHAIR:** Please stop using that—

**Ms GRACE:** He has answered the question. A number—

**CHAIR:** Minister, can you hold for one moment? I will give one caution to the member for Kawana: I will not tolerate props in this chamber today. You can stop waving around pieces of paper thanks.

**Ms GRACE:** Mr Heley has made it clear that he is not aware of any, so the continuation of this kind of questioning—

**Mr SULLIVAN:** I have a point of order that Mr Heley's responsibility to this committee is under the minister's portfolio. Confirmation or otherwise of issues of criminal or parole issues are obviously outside of this portfolio's committee.

**Mr BLEIJIE:** Are you kidding me? This guy was hired by—

**CHAIR:** Member for Kawana—

**Mr BLEIJIE:**—WorkCover to—

**CHAIR:** Member for Kawana—

**Mr BLEIJIE:**—motivate the staff!

**CHAIR:** Member for Kawana—

**Mr BLEIJIE:** You are trying to hide this? Seriously!

**CHAIR:** Member for Kawana, this will be your very last caution. You are behaving disorderly. We have given you the latitude to ask a number of questions—in fact, 10 minutes worth of questions—through the minister to Mr Heley. I will not tolerate that sort of behaviour. Please do better.

**Ms GRACE:** How do you find out if someone is on parole? If WorkCover can find that out, we will provide it. If not, we will determine what we can and provide the information.

**Mr BLEIJIE:** Minister, is the chaos and crisis in the Palaszczuk government so bad—

**CHAIR:** Member for Kawana—

**Mr BLEIJIE:**—that you are now hiring—

**CHAIR:** Member for Kawana—

**Mr BLEIJIE:**—parolees to—

**CHAIR:** Member for Kawana—

**Mr BLEIJIE:**—motivate your staff—

**CHAIR:** Member for Kawana—

**Mr BLEIJIE:**—and government?

**CHAIR:** Member for Kawana, I just called you to order three times.

**Mr BLEIJIE:** I did not hear, sorry.

**CHAIR:** Yes, you did.

**Mr BLEIJIE:** I am sorry.

**CHAIR:** Member for Kawana—

**Mr BLEIJIE:** You cannot tell me what I heard, Madam Chair. I did not hear; I was engaging.

**CHAIR:**—I just called you to order three times.

**Mr BLEIJIE:** Thank you, Madam Chair.

**CHAIR:** There is an imputation within that question and I will ask you to reword that question.

**Mr BLEIJIE:** Madam Chair, point of order: the standing orders require you to hear the question and I had not put the question before you ruled—

**CHAIR:** The imputation was already within the question, member for Kawana. Member for Kawana, put your question to the minister without imputation.

**Mr BLEIJIE:** Minister, WorkCover employed Mr Kratiuk—whether it was employed and paid I am not sure, but we are going to find out if they in fact paid any money—to deliver coaching and motivation. This gentleman—I would not even call him that—committed assault occasioning bodily harm only last year. Is it appropriate that someone who only last year committed assault, in your electorate, I might add, is hired by WorkCover to deliver motivation and coaching to your staff in the department?

**Ms GRACE:** To start off with, I was not aware that this person had been employed by WorkCover. It is the first that I have heard of it. It is an operational matter in WorkCover, so I do not get to know every single person that is employed. I am happy to investigate it and if the allegations that the member for Kawana are raising are correct—I am not sure whether they are all correct—we will certainly look at it. I will talk to the director-general in relation to this. I am assuming the director-general had no knowledge about this either and we will certainly raise it with the CEO upon his return.

**Mr BLEIJIE:** Through you, minister, to the acting CEO of WorkCover: can you advise whether there has been a recent increase and what percentage that increase is to Queensland businesses for WorkCover please?

**Ms GRACE:** I am actually happy to answer that question. It does not have to go to the acting CEO. It is a board and a government decision.

**Mr BLEIJIE:** I want the acting—

**CHAIR:** It is up to the minister—

**Ms GRACE:** It is my discretion.

**CHAIR:** It is the minister's discretion as to whether she answers it or refers it to the acting CEO.

**Mr BLEIJIE:** This is the problem, Madam Chair: the CEO is meant to be here. I should be able to ask the CEO questions.

**Ms GRACE:** But there is an acting CEO.

**CHAIR:** Member for Kawana and Minister, I am not debating this matter with you.

**Mr BLEIJIE:** I want to ask the acting CEO.

**CHAIR:** It is very clear that the acting CEO is here and in accordance with the schedule the minister has the right to first respond to the question to which she is going to do so, so, please, let us hear the answer. Minister.

**Mr BLEIJIE:** Point of order, Madam Chair: can the committee secretariat confirm that we received documentation that actually had statutory authorities—'Mr David Heley, Acting Chief Executive Officer, WorkCover Queensland' on documentation that we were provided? I would just prefer the minister to ask the acting CEO to answer the question.

**Ms Grace** interjected.

**CHAIR:** Member for Kawana—

**Ms Grace** interjected.

**CHAIR:**—with due respect and, Minister—

**Mr BLEIJIE:** If you have the answer, Minister, answer it.

**Ms GRACE:** But if you are—

**CHAIR:** Member for Kawana and Minister, I am having a discussion with the secretariat—

**Ms GRACE:** Oh, sorry, Chair.

**CHAIR:**—based on a question that you just rightly asked, so please have the courtesy to allow me to get that information from the secretariat. Member for Kawana, you have a schedule there. You have a list there. Even if the CEO was here for you to directly question him, there is schedule 7, so please take a look at that. Please take a look at the standing orders, just to refresh your memory.

**Mr BLEIJIE:** Thank you, Madam Chair. I am happy for—

**CHAIR:** No, no, no. I am responding to your question, so allow me to do that. So I am asking you, member for Kawana, please refer to schedule 7 that is in front of you now.

**Mr BLEIJIE:** I am sorry, Madam Chair, but you cannot tell me what to read or not to read. I am—



**CHAIR:** Member for Kawana, then what I am suggesting to you is that schedule 7 does not give the CEO, even if the CEO were here, the ability to respond. It is the responsibility of the minister to make that determination at her discretion. Minister, you said that you had the answer to that. Member for Kawana, would you like to hear that answer?

**Mr BLEIJIE:** Absolutely!

**Ms GRACE:** Queensland retains the lowest average premium rate of any state or territory at \$1.29 per \$100 of wages after discounts despite a modest increase in 2023-24. My understanding is that the increase is around 4.8 per cent from \$1.23 to \$1.29. As we know, inflation has been significantly high in recent times, so it is nowhere near the rate of inflation. We are very proud that we can run such an efficient and effective—one of the best—workers compensation systems in the country at the lowest premium mark. That premium rose to \$1.29 for 2023-24. I do not know whether the CEO would have anything more to add to that, so I will take that as the question answered.

**Mr BLEIJIE:** My question is to the director-general, if I may. Director-General, in July 2021 I referred to the CCC a complaint on behalf of SEQ Formwork. The complaint surrounded harassment on site by the CFMEU and alleged colluding by the CFMEU and Helen Burgess in the Office of Industrial Relations. On 27 February I received a reply from your department that states—

The CCC advise that it accepted the position taken by OIR and has recorded the allegations as raised as being unsubstantiated. However, the CCC letter I received on 28 February said—

The CCC notes in addition to the investigation findings the OIR have identified a number of systemic issues it intends to address procedurally.

Can you advise the committee what the investigation findings were please?

**Mr De'Ath:** I thank the member for the question and I will defer to the Acting Deputy Director, Peter McKay, to respond to the detail on that question.

**Mr McKay:** In assessing the investigation report that was provided to the department, there were some issues raised around the procedures that had been adopted by employees and those involved the use of personal mobile phone devices and instruction had previously been issued around that and so that instruction was further clarified and given to staff in relation to our investigation processes and not using mobile phones for that purpose.

**Mr BLEIJIE:** Thank you, Acting Deputy Director-General. With respect to that issue, the letter I received from your department said that nothing was substantiated, the claims of the allegations I made were not substantiated. Are you aware that on 6 March 2023 the Industrial Relations Commission handed down its judgement in Burgess v State of Queensland where the judge, Vice-President O'Connor, says that allegations—and he references my complaint in this judgement—were substantiated. In fact, three of the allegations were substantiated. So why did the department write to me saying there was no allegation substantiated but now we have a judgement in Queensland saying that, with respect to my particular complaint, there were three allegations that were substantiated? Were they substantiated or were they not substantiated?

**CHAIR:** That question is to the director-general?

**Mr BLEIJIE:** Yes.

**Mr De'Ath:** Indeed, the matters were thoroughly investigated. It is not unusual, in the course of investigations, some other matter, seemingly related or unrelated, would apply. That is now a matter of public record through that finding and I will ask Mr McKay to respond in more detail.

**Mr McKay:** I cannot comment, I think, on what led to those comments in the judgement. But what I can say is that, as has been indicated in the closure letter to the member, the CCC in the matter of the allegations that had been referred to the department from the member, the CCC, having reviewed our investigation process and decision-making process, recorded that all of the allegations referred had been unsubstantiated.

**CHAIR:** We will move to government questions.

**Mr SULLIVAN:** My question is to the minister with reference to pages 7 and 8 of the department's SDS. Could the minister inform the committee of the various initiatives being undertaken to address the important issue of mental health in the workplace and, in particular, with reference to the psychosocial code of practice?

**Ms GRACE:** Yes. I thank the member for the question. Obviously we want to ensure that our workplaces are safe. The Palaszczuk government knows that managing psychosocial hazards is just

as important as managing the physical ones, often more difficult and more complicated, particularly from a WorkCover managing of claims perspective. That is why we have developed Australia's first legally enforceable code of practice on psychosocial hazards which commenced on 1 April this year. The *Managing the risk of psychosocial hazards at work: code of practice* was developed in consultation with academics, registered unions, employer organisations and the community sector. This code is yet another nation-leading reform by the government when it comes to worker safety.

I was proud to partner with Queensland's mental health ambassador, Hayley Lewis, to launch the new code. Hayley is passionate about psychological health. She has personal experience, navigating difficult times as an athlete, a mother, a sister, a high-profile personality and a small business owner. Hayley has been a leader in encouraging workers and employers to use the code to promote safe and healthy workplaces. The code provides clear information and practical guidance about managing psychological risk such as violence and aggression, bullying and harassment, sexual harassment and other cumulative psychosocial hazards such as high workloads. Queensland is the only jurisdiction in Australia—can I say that again: the only jurisdiction in Australia—where codes of practice are legally enforceable. This means employers must comply with the code or demonstrate they are managing the safety at an equivalent level.

The introduction of this important code and supporting education and guidance material has been welcomed by employer groups, including Master Builders Queensland whose General Manager of Workforce Services, Craig Dearling, said the new code will almost certainly assist in achieving better work health and safety outcomes for the industry. We all know that tackling mental health requires a multifaceted approach and that is why my department undertakes a range of initiatives to complement the code. We have Workers' Psychological Support Service, an online People at Work risk assessment tool, delivery of the mentally healthy workplaces toolkit, Toolbox Talks videos and workshops and the development of tools and resources with tailored FAQs for employers and employees as well as case studies, risk management measures and detailed guidance on common psychosocial hazards and factors. We also provide support for suicide prevention. Mates in Construction delivers a multifaceted suicide prevention program for workers in the construction industry, one of the world's leaders in this area, and we support them in relation to the delivery of that service. This new code is a step forward towards ensuring that Queensland continues to lead the nation when it comes to worker safety.

**CHAIR:** With regard to protecting workers from sexual harassment in the workplace, could you give us an update on what has happened in the Industrial Relations Act?

**Ms GRACE:** Thank you for the question. I know that all the members are passionate about this. Every worker desires to go to work without being sexually harassed. However, sadly, this is often not the case. The 2020 Respect@Work report by the Australian Human Rights Commission confirmed what many suspected—sexual harassment is prevalent throughout workplaces. Sexual harassment is a serious issue that permeates all elements of society—including the workplace—and we must do all we can to address this scourge. That is why the government took decisive action to protect workers from sexual harassment or sex- or gender-based harassment.

Last year I proudly introduced a bill into the parliament that responded to the five-year review of the Queensland Industrial Relations Act 2016 which made 40 recommendations for the enhancement of this important piece of legislation. I am especially proud of the changes made to our IR Act that provide nation-leading protection for workers subject to sexual harassment. These changes make it clear that sexual or sex- or gender-based harassment is not tolerated in the workplace. They include strengthening protections for workers subject to sexual harassment or sex- or gender-based harassment by making sexual harassment and sex- or gender-based harassment an industrial matter, meaning that the Queensland Industrial Relations Commission can quickly address and resolve disputes through its powers to conciliate, arbitrate and issue injunctive relief; aligning the definition of sexual harassment and discrimination in the IR Act to make it consistent with the Anti-Discrimination Act and the Commonwealth Sex Discrimination Act so there are no differences—they are all aligned; and providing that a person who commits sexual harassment or sex- or gender-based harassment can be summarily dismissed on the grounds of misconduct and that a dismissal may be found not to be unfair if the employee engaged in such harassment while at work or otherwise in connection to their employment.

Changes to the act though are not the end of the story. We are also tackling this issue from a workplace health and safety perspective through development of sexual harassment guidelines to strengthen Queensland's work health and safety laws and ensure this issue is sufficiently elevated in the work health and safety framework. It is anticipated consultation will commence later this year on

these new regulations. We know that strong laws need to be coupled with the support for workers who are experiencing or have experienced sexual harassment or sex- or gender-based harassment.

I am very proud of our longstanding funding provided to the Working Women's Centre program which has delivered the Basic Rights Queensland assistance in this area as well. We believe everyone has a right to work in a harassment free workplace and these codes and the information we have available will hopefully work towards that.

**Mr SULLIVAN:** My question is to the minister, again in reference to pages 7 and 8 of the department's SDS. Could the minister provide the committee with an update on bargaining in the public sector, including how the public sector wages policy is responding to cost-of-living pressures that Queenslanders are facing?

**Ms GRACE:** Thank you for the question. Obviously we value very much our public sector workers and the critical roles that they play, especially those who provide frontline services to the Queensland community. That is why we have committed to ensuring our public sector workers receive fair and reasonable wages and conditions. The Queensland Public Sector Wages Policy, which applies to the current enterprise bargaining round, is leading the nation. Together with the cumulative increases delivered by the Palaszczuk government since 2015, we are delivering some real cost-of-living benefits to the Public Service in Queensland. It is very difficult in a high-inflation environment to establish a wages policy. You do not want our workers to fall behind. There are cost-of-living pressures out there. I am pleased to say that our agreements are not allowing that to occur. The policy includes three-year agreements with headline increases of four per cent in the first, four per cent in the second and three per cent in the third.

Cost-of-living pressures are impacting all Queenslanders and our hardworking public servants, which is why our wages policy also includes an additional cost-of-living payment. This lump sum payment, capped at three per cent, is paid where in an agreement year the March CPI exceeds the headline wage percentage for that year. It will be paid to many public servants to compensate them for that additional high inflation. This means that in 2023 frontline workers to receive the additional cost-of-living adjustment payment include nurses and midwives, police officers, paramedics and firefighters, teachers and teacher aides. There are a number of them who will be qualifying for this payment. We are proud of our record of finalising negotiations and I am proud to say that recently the core agreement covering over 30,000 Public Service workers is coming to the end of its bargaining round, which is terrific. Within my portfolio I am pleased to report that the Office of Industrial Relations has certified agreements for our teachers, teacher aides, school cleaners and support staff employed at schools. These agreements were overwhelmingly re-endorsed, with over 97 per cent voting in favour—a very successful round of bargaining. From 1 July public sector workers began receiving changes to superannuation: 12.75 per cent will now be paid. This is higher than the current Commonwealth super guarantee of 11 per cent.

Coupled with the super changes—and it is not dependent on a five per cent contribution from employees; it is 12.5 per cent. We were paying that in the majority of cases. Some were only receiving the levy. We have now made it standard towards all so, coupled with that, we are looking after the hardworking public servants in the Queensland government. We make no apologies for it.

**CHAIR:** Member for Maiwar?

**Mr BERKMAN:** Chair, you caught me off guard a little, there. My question was actually going to relate quite closely to the answer that the minister has just given. My understanding is that, based on the RBA and Queensland Treasury figures for current and forecast levels of inflation, under the existing EBA public sector workers in schools and health care will have received a real wage cut of more than three per cent by mid-2024 since the start of that agreement. My first question is to the director-general. Do you accept those figures that, relative to the recorded and forecast inflation, these frontline workers, teachers and nurses, will end up with a real pay cut?

**Mr De'Ath:** I do not believe on the surface of what you have put to me that I do accept that. I would need to investigate the exact calculations you have used there to better understand that and respond accurately.

**Mr BERKMAN:** If I could drill down a little bit on that, the minister's previous answer referred to the cost-of-living supplement. Is that what it was called?

**Ms GRACE:** Yes. It is up to a three per cent additional cost-of-living payment on top of the four per cent that they got already.

**CHAIR:** Member for Maiwar, you have had two parts to that question. Member for Hinchinbrook, your question?

**Mr BERKMAN:** Are you serious?

**Mr DAMETTO:** Minister, in respect to WorkCover, has the government considered separating the regime of physical and mental health WorkCover claims? For context, someone suffering from a physical injury can have their fitness or return-to-work measures in a more certain way whereas someone suffering from a mental health injury may need a more prolonged period of recovery.

**Ms GRACE:** The member is right: often they are more difficultly handled psychological injuries but we do have a process. There is a definition in the Act about how that is progressed and the department works through the issues. We brought in changes for psychological claims whereby they can continue on with their treatment while the claims are being looked at, which is a significant change to how WorkCover was handling psychological injuries. We found that, at a time when workers probably needed the most assistance, their treatment stopped because we were in the middle of looking at a claim. Obviously, depending on the complications, we have a very good rate of assessing these claims. The Acting CEO may want to give some more statistics in regard to that.

**Mr DAMETTO:** To give you a little more context, Director-General, there is a certain period once you put a WorkCover claim in. I understand you go from 85 per cent of your usual wage and after a certain amount of time you drop down to 75 per cent.

**Ms GRACE:** Are you talking about the step downs?

**Mr DAMETTO:** With that dropping down to 75 per cent, from my experience people have said to me that they feel more pressure to go back to work earlier with a mental health injury.

**Ms GRACE:** It is the same across all injuries. It would be very difficult to differentiate an entitlement for someone with a physical injury or a secondary psychological injury to one with a psychological injury. All the injuries that are work related are treated the same. It is a no-fault scheme. You go to common law when you want to establish fault. This is a no-fault scheme. It would be very difficult to differentiate between those because those with a very severe physical injury would feel they have exactly the same right as someone with a psychological injury. No, we would not entertain any differentiation. The manner in which they are assessed and handled, we think, is done on a very fair basis that includes, as I mentioned before, the secondary psychological injury that can come from a very severe physical injury as well.

**Mr BLEIJIE:** Director-General, I want to interrogate the issue that we left on before. I refer to the letter I received from your department on 24 February with respect to the allegations that I raised with the CCC with SEQ Formwork and the Office of Industrial Relations. The letter clearly says that the CCC accepted the position by the Office of Industrial Relations as the claims being unsubstantiated. Had Ms Burgess not had disciplinary action taken against her and appealed it to the Queensland Industrial Relations Commission, I would never have known that some of the allegations I put to the CCC were substantiated. I really need to understand how, as the complainant, I received a letter from your department saying claims were unsubstantiated but now I have a court judgement saying three were substantiated, including: failed to make a record of a complaint that had been received by Helen Burgess from the CFMEU on her personal phone, and she then used her personal phone to send that to someone's else phone; follow due process; and did not ensure the matter was treated and recorded as being a reactive rather than a proactive assessment. The judgement says those were substantiated. Have I been misled?

**CHAIR:** Member for Kawana, that was again a very lengthy preamble and I understand you are trying to provide context. Director-General, would you like to clarify your previous response to give more certainty to the member for Kawana, please?

**Mr De'Ath:** We are happy to provide more clarification for you on the matter if you appear unclear at this stage.

**Mr BLEIJIE:** I am not unclear, Director-General. I am clear. I have the judgement here. It references my complaint to the CCC.

**Ms GRACE:** But that is the CCC complaints that were substantiated.

**Mr BLEIJIE:** No. Minister, the CCC—

**CHAIR:** You are already out of order because you are debating across the table. Member for Kawana and Minister, it is out of order. Please allow the director-general to continue.

**Mr De'Ath:** I received advice from the CCC that all matters were unsubstantiated. I will hand to Mr McKay for more detail.

**Mr McKay:** Without the benefit of having the judgement in front of me, what I can only assume—sorry. I will start by saying that the matters that the member referred to the CCC and that were referred back to the department were recorded by the CCC following our investigation as being unsubstantiated. It may well be that the matters that are referenced in the judgement that the member is referring to are disciplinary allegations formed under the then Public Service Act that were put to Ms Burgess as part of the disciplinary process. Those were matters that fell out of our review of that investigation, which found that there were some procedural issues around the way in which the investigation process was conducted and the disciplinary allegations were substantiated in the mind of the departmental decision-maker and then that was found to be correct by the judgement of the QIRC.

**Mr BLEIJIE:** Director-General, one of my allegations was that Helen Burgess was communicating using a private mobile phone with the CFMEU and she is a senior director in Workplace Health and Safety in the Office of Industrial Relations. Am I correct that the acting deputy director-general just said that the allegation that I raised about the use of the personal mobile phone was, in fact, not investigated by the Ashdale firm that did the report and then the department dealt with that separately as a disciplinary matter? That was one of the major complaints of my allegations.

**Mr De'Ath:** The discipline came out of the allegation. As I said before, the CCC have formally responded saying that all allegations were unsubstantiated. My department has undertaken a very thorough process beyond that in terms of one matter sitting outside of that. I think Mr McKay has answered the question.

**Mr BLEIJIE:** Director-General, why was my allegation about the use of a personal mobile phone not investigated by the company that the department sourced to do the investigation? It seems the department took a part of my allegation that seemed to be actually substantiated and did not investigate that part but has dealt with it as a separate matter. I believe I have been misled—

**CHAIR:** Member for Kawana, again, there is a repetitiveness to this line of questioning and I would also ask you to really—

**Mr Lister** interjected.

**CHAIR:** Member for Southern Downs, I am on the mic. Could you explain the relevance to the budget estimates in this line of questioning?

**Mr BLEIJIE:** Seriously. Chair, Helen Burgess is a senior director in Workplace Health and Safety who had allegations she was using her personal mobile phone to communicate with the CCC—

**CHAIR:** Her personal mobile phone.

**Mr BLEIJIE:** Yes—and not her official mobile phone.

**CHAIR:** And the director-general and the assistant have answered your question. You might not like the answer—

**Mr BLEIJIE:** No, I don't think so.

**CHAIR:** You might not like the answer. I would ask you to move on to your next line of questioning.

**Ms GRACE:** She's been disciplined.

**Mr BLEIJIE:** I take the interjection from the minister that she has been disciplined, despite my raising this for years.

**CHAIR:** I ask both the minister and the member for Kawana to please stop the cross-table quarrelling. I ask the member for Kawana to move on to his next line of questions.

**Mr BLEIJIE:** Director-General, the Queensland Industrial Relations Commission judgement says—and this was a letter from Mr James who works in the department; in a response Mr James wrote about the disciplinary matter for Ms Burgess—

I am concerned that your response appears to minimise the seriousness of your conduct, including by characterising it as a "human error" and a "misclassification" (which, as set above, I do not accept) arising from systemic practices adopted by you and other senior employees.

Director-General, what are the systemic practices adopted by Ms Helen Burgess and other senior employees in the Office of Industrial Relations?

**Mr De'Ath:** I believe this matter has concluded beyond the relevant authority. I do not have anything to add to what we have already described about this very matter. I will defer to Mr McKay to see if there is anything he would like to add.

**CHAIR:** Would you like to add anything, Mr McKay?

**Mr BLEIJIE:** It is pretty serious.

**CHAIR:** No? Thank you very much.

**Mr BLEIJIE:** 'Systemic practices' in the department and you are not offering the committee any further advice?

**CHAIR:** Member for Kawana!

**Mr BLEIJIE:** This is disgraceful.

**CHAIR:** Member for Kawana, as I said, you might not like the answer, but you have been responded to on multiple occasions.

**Mr BLEIJIE:** Well, Chair, it is budget estimates.

**CHAIR:** I just said that you might not like the answer.

**Mr BLEIJIE:** It is budget estimates and they are required to answer to the question.

**CHAIR:** Member for Kawana, I am not asking to debate with you.

**Mr BLEIJIE:** Director-General—

**CHAIR:** You can wait for the call. Member for Kawana, please ask your next question.

**Mr BLEIJIE:** Director-General, the case that was brought by Helen Burgess, an employee of your department, to the Queensland Industrial Relations Commission was against disciplinary action taken against her directly involving a complaint to the CCC by me and SEQ Formwork. Now it is 2½ years later. I am advised by SEQ Formwork that on 11 April 2023 they received a letter from the QBCC asking and investigating whether an individual is a fit-and-proper person to exercise control of SEQ Formwork. I know the QBCC is not in this portfolio; however, interestingly the letter from the QBCC says—

The QBCC has obtained information from workplace health and safety about SEQ Formwork.

Can you advise this committee who provided the information to QBCC 2½ years after the complaint about the CFMEU allegations?

**Mr De'Ath:** I am not aware of the correspondence and I will defer to Mr McKay.

**Mr McKay:** There is an information sharing memorandum of agreement that has been struck for over a decade between the QBCC and Workplace Health and Safety Queensland where matters of infringement are raised in the construction industry they can be passed to the QBCC. The information that has passed has passed through that memorandum of understanding that has been struck for over a decade.

**Mr BLEIJIE:** Director-General, I have made an RTI request to the department for information with respect to what was handed from Workplace Health and Safety Queensland to QBCC with respect to SEQ Formwork. The RTI officers in your department have said that no documents can be located. I again ask the question: who in Workplace Health and Safety provided information to QBCC, because it appears to me—

**CHAIR:** There are multiple questions and you have put your question. Director-General?

**Mr De'Ath:** I thank the member for the question. I think I have responded to that saying I am not aware of the correspondence or where that came from.

**CHAIR:** Thank you, Director-General.

**Mr BLEIJIE:** Out of nowhere? It just happened.

**CHAIR:** Member for Kawana, he has answered your question.

**Mr BLEIJIE:** Director-General, is it the case that—and this is a serious matter—a company in Queensland has made serious allegations against the CFMEU and staff in the Office of Industrial Relations, those claims have been substantiated by a vice-president of the QIRC and then out of the blue 2½ years after making these allegations in terms of this very company, the QBCC asks if this person passes the fit-and-proper person test. Are you telling me and this committee that you cannot find for me and this committee who in Workplace Health and Safety is the individual who passed on

information about SEQ Formwork to the QBCC leading it to ask questions about whether this individual is a fit-and-proper person?

**CHAIR:** Member for Kawana, you were not here this morning when we commenced proceedings. I reminded everybody in this room that we would conduct these proceedings in a respectful manner.

**Mr BLEIJIE:** And I have watched the protection racket for these estimates process happen all day.

**CHAIR:** And you are reaching the point where you are badgering the director-general.

**Mr BLEIJIE:** The questions are not being answered. These are serious matters. The director-general is responsible for Workplace Health and Safety—

**CHAIR:** Member for Kawana, you have just used unparliamentary language. You may withdraw the term that you just used. It is unparliamentary.

**Mr BLEIJIE:** These are serious matters.

**CHAIR:** No.

**Mr BLEIJIE:** I am not sure of the word you are referring to.

**CHAIR:** Protection racket. I pulled the minister up on it earlier and I am pulling you up on it now.

**Mr BLEIJIE:** I withdraw.

**CHAIR:** Thank you. If you would like to put your last question to the director-general in a way that is not badgering, that would be appreciated.

**Mr BLEIJIE:** I will put the question again, Director-General, because this is a serious matter and is subject to a court case that has concluded. Can you find out before the end of this estimates period today who referenced—

**CHAIR:** Member for Kawana, can you confirm that that is not a criminal charge?

**Mr BLEIJIE:** Pardon?

**CHAIR:** You just said that it is in the court system.

**Mr BLEIJIE:** The Queensland Industrial Relations Commission; it is a disciplinary matter.

**CHAIR:** I am just asking the question. It is easy enough for you to politely respond. Member for Kawana, you can put your question to the director-general.

**Mr BLEIJIE:** I would like to do it without being continually interrupted as has been the process during these estimates.

**CHAIR:** Member for Kawana, please be polite, courteous and respectful as I just asked you to do so. Would you like to put your last question to the director-general?

**Mr BLEIJIE:** Director-General, I am asking you whether, before the estimates hearing is concluded today, you can advise this committee who the individual was in Workplace Health and Safety or the Office of Industrial Relations that referred matters to the QBCC with respect to SEQ Formwork, a Queensland company, that had made allegations against employees of your department and the CFMEU 2½ years ago? Is it more than a coincidence—

**CHAIR:** The question has been put.

**Mr BLEIJIE:** Is it more than a coincidence? It seems more than a coincidence.

**CHAIR:** Member for Kawana, you are on a warning now. That is your last warning. You interject one more time—and I am loathe to do it—but I will eject you from this chamber. Please, cease with your interjections. Director-General, if you would like to answer the question?

**Mr SULLIVAN:** I have a point of order in relation to standing order 115(b)(vi) where names of individuals should not be raised unless they are specifically required. I do not think it is appropriate for this committee or any member or guest member of this committee to ask for a specific name of a public servant in the role of their job—

**Mr LISTER:** This is a matter of public interest.

**Mr BLEIJIE:** This is a serious matter.

**CHAIR:** Member for Southern Downs and member for Kawana—and I remind the member for Kawana that he is on a warning—

**Mr SULLIVAN:** I am referring to specific standing orders, Chair.

**CHAIR:** I am taking the point of order. He has put it. Let me seek some advice. I appreciate your point of order, member for Stafford. Unfortunately, that information is already there and out. Director-General, would you like to respond to that question?

**Mr De'Ath:** I thank the member for the question. I believe that the question has been responded to. No name will be provided. Mr McKay has referred to the information sharing protocol and that, as far as I am concerned, is the end of that matter.

**Mr Lister** interjected.

**CHAIR:** Member for Southern Downs, don't do it.

**Mr O'ROURKE:** My question is to the minister. With reference to pages 7 and 8 of the SDS, could the minister provide an update on the review of the Electrical Safety Act as well as any ongoing awareness and safety initiatives in this area?

**Ms GRACE:** In relation to the last exchange, the memorandum of understanding with the QBCC actually happened under the watch of the member for Kawana. We are only implementing the exchange of health and safety information to the QBCC for their licensing requirements. It happened under his watch.

As I have said many times, often there are no second chances when it comes to electrical safety. That is why the Palaszczuk government takes it incredibly seriously. Since 2015 we have consistently acted to make our community safer around electricity through a range of measures, including restoring the Electrical Safety Office, the Commissioner for Electrical Safety and the important electrical safety committees. They, once again, were cut by the previous government under the watch of the member for Kawana. Our ongoing Electrical Safety Act review—

**Mr LISTER:** Point of order under 118, relevance. We have been here before. The minister is going over a government which will soon have been four elections ago that is not the subject of this estimates hearing.

**CHAIR:** This is much of what we have previously heard in the lead-up to this. Minister, can you come back to the question.

**Ms GRACE:** I think it is most relevant. I refer to our ongoing Electrical Safety Act review and partnering with the world famous Wiggles. As the committee would be aware, one of the service delivery standards for electrical safety is a reduction in the number of reported serious electrical incidents over the year on a five-year rolling average. I am pleased to advise that the serious incident figures back the action which we have taken on electrical safety and have trended downwards since 2017-18.

In fact, as at 30 June 2023 there has been a 7.3 per cent reduction in reported serious electrical incidents. This is a great outcome, but we never rest on our laurels. We will continue to make sure Queensland has high standards when it comes to electrical safety. That is why an independent review was conducted into the Electrical Safety Act 2002. We recently published the comprehensive review report and its 83 recommendations. The recommendations are wide ranging, complex and technical. I think it just demonstrates how much the industry has transformed, with renewable energy and with changes in the area of electrical safety.

We decided to publish the review report and seek public feedback on the recommendations through a two-stage consultation approach. Our first stage was a targeted discussion paper which sought feedback on the following three key areas: electrical safety considerations of new and emerging technologies; the changing landscape of electricity and the workforce; and electrical safety and electric vehicles. When the act was first set we did not have electric vehicles to the extent we have now, so we are now working on electric vehicles and the safety surrounding them. Feedback on the discussion paper closed on 27 June. We had a great response, receiving 64 submissions.

We also invited feedback on the remaining recommendations of the review report. This broader consultation closes on 15 August. As of 12 July we have had 40 submissions in this consultation round. Feedback from the discussion paper will be used to inform the first tranche of our legislative reforms, anticipated to be progressed later this year. This will be accompanied by a package of regulatory reforms. The second tranche of the legislation is planned to follow in 2024 and will be guided by the feedback which closes on 15 August.

Getting the policy settings right is crucial, but it is equally important that we have continual dialogue with the Queensland public about the safety risks of electricity. This is especially important for our younger generation. After all, we all have contact with electricity each and every day. Our partnership with The Wiggles has been extraordinary. It is an investment of \$450,000 over three years,



from 2022 to 2025, and it is delivering electrical safety awareness targeted at children aged one to nine and their families. I had the pleasure of meeting the Wiggles at the launch with their song *Electricity!* as part of the campaign. The video for *Electricity!* has reached an audience of over 2.4 million views. Five short accompanying videos for parents and children have also collectively been viewed 2.7 million times. It is really extraordinary. We have Electrical Safety Week. We have an arc flash safety film. Switch to Safety is a series of five short films promoting electrical safety. We need to get the message out that with electricity there are no second chances. We have a range of educational resources. There are safety advocates who attend workplaces to share their stories as well. I thank them for taking the opportunity to do that.

**Mr SULLIVAN:** Minister, I will resist the urge to ask you for a rendition?

**Ms GRACE:** No.

**Mr SULLIVAN:** Jokes aside, in relation to the department's SDS, pages 7 and 8, can the minister update the committee on its response to the Work Health and Safety Act review? What are the next steps in that space?

**Ms GRACE:** We have the review of the Electrical Safety Act which I just spoke about. That is huge—83 recommendations with a lot of side recommendations as well. We are working through that. As I said, we hope to have the first tranche by the end of the year. At the same time, following the 2017 review of the Dreamworld and Eagle Farm tragedies, we now have the five-year review coming on. As we know, the first tranche included the criminal offence of industrial manslaughter—the first state in Australia—establishing the independent Office of the Work Health and Safety Prosecutor, clarifying the status of codes of practice as being legally enforceable and introducing new regulations to major theme parks and amusement rides. The world looked at what we did there. They were very impressed by what we did and have used it, I know, as a tool for themselves overseas.

We must ensure health and safety laws remain contemporary. We have had a review by three independent, eminently qualified reviewers. The reviewers consulted widely with industry groups, employers, registered employer organisations, registered unions, the legal profession, academics and government agencies. The review found that good safety outcomes for Queensland workers are best achieved when we encourage workers to be involved, where they are supported in their active role in the workplace and where there are high levels of cooperation between employers and employees.

The review's final report was released on 1 May this year and contained 31 recommendations consisting of 55 subrecommendations. I am pleased to advise that the government has accepted all 31 recommendations arising from the independent review. Key themes in the recommendations include elevating the role of health and safety representatives, clarifying the rights of health and safety representatives, and streamlining the issues and dispute resolution procedures in the act.

Consultation will continue with stakeholders. We hope to get legislation happening soon, so the committee will have a number of busy periods with legislation relating to the Electrical Safety Act and the Work Health and Safety Act. They are big pieces of work. We will get them before the House and to the committee as soon as possible.

**Mr O'ROURKE:** With reference to pages 7 and 8 of the SDS, could the minister provide the committee with an update on how the Palaszczuk government's changes to presumptive access to workers compensation for first responders with PTSD are helping their mental health?

**Ms GRACE:** Thank you for the question. I know that we have bipartisan support with PTSD deeming provisions in the legislation. Every day our first responders help and support Queenslanders in need. Police officers, fireies, ambos, SES volunteers and other frontline workers encounter members in the community on the worst day of their lives and face situations most of us would never imagine. As a result, we made the PTSD changes early this year. On 20 May we marked the second anniversary of our changes to the workers compensation system for first responders who are suffering from PTSD. They apply to a number of public servants who are first responders. The data shows that these laws are enabling access to PTSD WorkCover for our first responders, with some claims being decided in as little as four days. The process has been streamlined: they are deemed to be accepted. It has saved numerous lives because assistance can be given a lot quicker. I commend all of the people who are implementing these changes and commend the work of our first responders in this state.

**Mr SULLIVAN:** In relation to pages 7 and 8 of the SDS, can the minister provide the committee with an update on the workers compensation scheme in Queensland, including the review of the workers compensation act?

**CHAIR:** Minister, a quick response would be good.

**Ms GRACE:** We have a review happening at the moment. There will be another piece of legislation to come before the committee. The review should be completed very soon. We will then look at that review. We will obviously make the legislative changes that may be recommended. I highlight that that is another substantial review by independent reviewers. It is another substantial piece of work that will come to the committee in the future.

**CHAIR:** The time allocated for the consideration of the proposed estimates for the portfolios of the Minister for Education, Minister for Industrial Relations and Minister for Racing has expired.

**Mr BLEIJIE:** Point of order: don't we have two minutes to go? It is 1.58. I have more questions.

**CHAIR:** No, member.

**Mr BLEIJIE:** Are we finishing early?

**CHAIR:** Member, I am about to hand over the minister to wrap up the time with Hansard. Thank you very much for your point of order. It is not a point of order.

**Mr BLEIJIE:** Bring on Rebecca Young!

**CHAIR:** Member for Kawana, you are so disrespectful.

**Mr BLEIJIE:** I am just saying, Rebecca Young is going to be a great representative.

**CHAIR:** Member for Kawana, you may depart the chamber. Thank you very much.

**Mr BLEIJIE:** Thank you.

**Mr SULLIVAN:** What a child. Go back to kindy.

**CHAIR:** Thanks, member for Stafford. I do not need the interjection, either. Minister, I note there were no questions taken on notice. On behalf of the committee, I thank you, the director-general and the officials from the Department of Education, the Office of Racing, the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries and the Office of Industrial Relations. Minister, would you like to make some closing remarks?

**Ms GRACE:** Before you close, can I please place on record my sincere thanks to the following staff for their assistance in preparing for today: all of the staff of the Department of Education, the Office of Industrial Relations, Racing Queensland and QRIC. A lot of work goes into preparing for estimates and I am very grateful to all of them. I also thank my ministerial staff for their constant and loyal support, in particular my chief of staff, Katelyn Dougherty.

I thank you, Chair, and members of the Education, Employment and Training Committee as well as committee secretariat and staff—and Hansard, of course. I always maintain that it is an absolute privilege to be part of the estimates process and I look forward to 2024.

**CHAIR:** Thank you very much, Minister. Thank you to everybody appearing before us today. The committee will now adjourn for a break. The hearing will resume at 2.30 for the examination of estimates for the portfolios of the Minister for Employment and Small Business, Minister for Training and Skills Development and Minister for Youth Justice.

**Proceedings suspended from 2.00 pm to 2.30 pm.**

**ESTIMATES—EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING COMMITTEE—  
EMPLOYMENT AND SMALL BUSINESS; TRAINING AND SKILLS  
DEVELOPMENT; AND YOUTH JUSTICE****In Attendance**

Hon. DE Farmer, Minister for Employment and Small Business, Minister for Training and Skills Development and Minister for Youth Justice

Ms G Walters, Chief of Staff

**Department of Youth Justice, Employment, Small Business and Training**

Mr R Gee, Director-General

Mr S Koch, Acting Associate Director-General


**TAFE Queensland**

Mr J Tucker, Chief Executive Officer

**Queensland Small Business Commissioner**

Ms D Lamb, Commissioner

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 **CHAIR:** I am Kim Richards, the member for Redlands and chair of the committee. With me here today are: Mr James Lister, the deputy chair and member for Southern Downs; Mr Mark Boothman, the member for Theodore; Mr Nick Dametto, the member for Hinchinbrook; Mr Barry O'Rourke, the member for Rockhampton; and Mr Jimmy Sullivan, the member for Stafford. We also have at the table the member for Buderim, Mr Brent Mickelberg.

Until 6.45 pm the committee will examine the proposed expenditure contained in the Appropriations Bill for the portfolio of the Minister for Employment and Small Business, Minister for Training and Skills Development and Minister for Youth Justice. As was determined by the House, the committee will examine areas within the minister's portfolio areas as follows: training and skills development from 2.30 pm to 4 pm; employment and small business from 4.15 pm to 5.15 pm; and youth justice from 5.30 pm to 6.45 pm. I remind honourable members that matters relating to these portfolio areas can only be raised during the time specified for the area, as was agreed by the House. The committee will suspend proceedings for breaks from 4 pm to 4.15 pm and from 5.15 pm to 5.30 pm.

The committee has granted leave for a number of non-committee members to attend and ask questions at this hearing. I remind all present here today that the committee proceedings are proceedings of the Queensland parliament and are subject to the standing rules and orders of the Legislative Assembly. It is important that questions and answers remain relevant and succinct. The same rules for questions that apply in the Legislative Assembly apply in this hearing. I refer to standing orders 112 and 115 in this regard. Questions should be brief and relate to one issue and should not contain lengthy or subjective preamble, argument or opinion. I am not sure if anybody had an opportunity to tune into the last session, but I intend to guide these proceedings in a respectful manner. I expect respectful behaviour from all members and people participating in these proceedings today. This is an opportunity to fully explore the budget, and I will be providing adequate opportunity to address questions from both government and non-government members of the committee.

I remind everyone present that any person may be excluded from the proceedings at my discretion or by order of the committee. While mobile phone use is not permitted in the public gallery, an exception has been made for staff who are assisting witnesses here today and who have been permitted the use of their device for this purpose. I do ask all present, however, to please switch your phones to silent mode if you have not done so already.

On behalf of the committee I welcome the minister, the directors-general, officials and members of the public to the hearing. For the benefit of Hansard I ask officials to identify themselves the first time they answer a question referred to them by the minister or the director-general.

I now declare the proposed expenditure for the portfolio areas of youth justice, employment and small business, and training and skills development open for examination. The question before the committee in this session is—

That the proposed expenditure be agreed to.

Minister, if you wish you may make an opening statements of no more than five minutes.

**Ms FARMER:** Thank you very much, Chair and committee, for the opportunity to address you. I acknowledge the Turrbal and Jagara people and pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging. I support a Voice to Parliament for Australia's First Nations people.

Just two months ago I was honoured to be asked by the Premier to add the youth justice portfolio to my employment, small business and training and skills development portfolios, and I have very much welcomed the appointment of Mr Bob Gee as my new director-general. Since that time the DG and I have travelled across the state meeting stakeholders, staff, victims and members of the public to discuss their experiences with youth justice. I thank them for those excellent conversations and for everything they do. I wish to assure victims of youth crime in particular that they will always have a voice.

My priorities for youth justice are community safety, tackling the complex causes of youth crime and targeting serious repeat offenders. I have made a commitment that everything we do will be based on evidence. In addition to the evaluation of youth justice programs and services being undertaken by the Auditor-General, my director-general will also be undertaking evaluations. I have been more than clear that, if anything we are doing is not working, we will stop doing it. I want to thank the members of my Youth Justice Reference Group, who I know will give me frank and fearless advice on everything we do, including ensuring that what we do is effective.

The other elements of my portfolio support some of the most significant aspects of our economy and our community in Queensland. I single out in particular in the employment portfolio Good People Good Jobs: Queensland Workforce Strategy 2022-2032, which addresses what is one of the top issues facing every employer and every region in Queensland—workforce shortages. I look forward to updating the committee on some of the early and excellent outcomes we are already seeing from this work. I flag at the outset, Chair, that through our broad range of grant funding programs and initiatives we estimate we have provided support and assistance in this last year alone to more than 44,600 workers or jobseekers.

The Palaszczuk government invests more than \$1.2 billion per annum in skills and training. We must ensure that our investment is attuned to the jobs that we need now and in the future, which is why at the same time we are negotiating a new national skills agreement with the Commonwealth. We are also conducting the most significant review of our vocational education and training system in Queensland in 14 years. VET qualifications will support Queenslanders gaining employment in eight out of 10 of the largest growing occupations by 2025-26. Through this review we will make sure our system meets the needs of our workforce now and in the future.

Small businesses are the backbone of our community, representing 97 per cent of our Queensland businesses and nearly 50 per cent of our private sector employees. They bring in \$145 billion in revenue to Queensland. I thank all of our small businesses for their contribution to our community and our economy. I am yet to meet a small business owner who does not love what they do, and our aim is to support them. We have provided over \$2.5 billion in support to small businesses through COVID, and our initiatives in this year's budget and our new small business strategy will aim to support them through the post-COVID economy. I particularly thank our key partner, Business Chamber Queensland, CEO Heidi Cooper, and all of the chambers throughout Queensland. Wherever I go across the state I always make sure that I check in with the local chamber, and I value their input.

Today we have with us in the chamber: Mr Geoff Favell, the Queensland Training Ombudsman; Ms Dominique Lamb, our new permanent Queensland Small Business Commissioner; and Mr John Tucker, who I am very pleased to announce was confirmed yesterday as the new CEO of TAFE Queensland. I congratulate him on his appointment. I thank these three people for their excellent work in our portfolio.

Thank you to the committee for your work and for your interest in this portfolio. I look forward to sharing with you the outcomes of the government's commitments in the portfolio and the hard work of the staff of my department and of all our stakeholders.

**Mr MICKELBERG:** Minister, a critical shortage of skilled workers has been widely reported for many years, as you just alluded to. In 2008 the then Queensland Labor minister for training Rod Welford said, 'One of the most critical issues facing Queensland industries is a serious shortfall in skilled tradespeople.' In response, the then Bligh government announced it would roll out the Train to Retain Strategy to address the high number of trainees who withdrew or did not finish training. Since 2008 the number of trainees who have completed their training has got worse, not better. Faced with the same problem now, your government, Minister, has wound back the clock and changed one word and

announced the Train and Retain Strategy. Given the plan did not address the problem in 2008, why will it work now?

**Ms FARMER:** The member has asked a question which is an absolute focus for me as the minister and my portfolio. We know there has been much stimulus put into increasing commencements in skills and training. There has been a 134 per cent increase in commencements in the last two years alone, and we need to make sure that every single one of those people who starts, also completes.

In Queensland our average completion rate is around 57 per cent, and the national average is around 55 per cent. It is a matter which is in sharp focus for national skills ministers. In fact Queensland was prominent in making sure that was on the national agenda. In Queensland, because of a range of measures, we have seen some quite significant increases. With a 35 per cent decline in completions over the last 10 years, we in fact have seen increases in Queensland over the last two years, I believe. I know that my staff are going to give me the figures, but I think it was something like a 16.4 per cent increase in completions the year before last and then another just over 11 per cent last year.

There are a range of things we are doing in that space. We work in individual sectors. For instance, in early childhood there has been something like a 43 per cent increase in completions, and different sectors are working with us to address specific issues. The train and retain strategy that the member refers to is as a result of the investigation I asked the Queensland Training Ombudsman to undertake last year to look at what the barriers are for apprentices, with a particular focus on female apprentices. As a result of that work, the Queensland Training Ombudsman made 12 recommendations, including some to specifically address women in male dominated occupations. We have accepted all of those and we are working our way through them. I have appointed an apprentice advisory group to look at implementing those recommendations. We have four apprentices on that group and it includes industry and union leaders, and they are looking at implementing those recommendations and also looking at the way forward.

One of the general statements that the Training Ombudsman made was that many apprentices simply do not know who they should talk to if they have a problem and often they do not even know that what is happening to them is not right. To create a single point of contact for that apprentice is the first really simple step. It appears from what I hear from 10 or 12 years ago that perhaps there was a body which was more prominent to apprentices.

We did name it 'train and retain' because that quite simply is what we are aiming at doing. For instance, through that one recommendation, we have made 330,000 personal points of contact with apprentices in Queensland, we have received over 45,000 calls as a result of our campaign to go out to apprentices, and our regional staff have made 4,400 visits. I am hearing anecdotally from so many peak bodies, unions and in fact skills ministers across the country that, just as apprentices need more support on what their rights are and how they can make any issues known, many employers—especially the small businesses, and the majority of people who have apprentices are actually small businesses—are not aware of what their responsibilities are, they do not know what the legislation is and they do not know what their requirements are.

It would be true to say that there are some employers who are just simply bad employers and they do not treat their apprentices well, but for the most part we are finding that they are the ones who need that help. In fact, part of our Workforce Strategy is aimed at supporting employers on a one-on-one basis just to try to get a good system in place for them. There is some really effective work happening.

It is a massive problem. We make an investment of \$1.2 billion in skills and training in Queensland. Even though we are higher than the national average, at 57 per cent completion that means there are 43 per cent not completing and that investment is not being maximised. It also means we are not able to fill those workforce shortages that are out there in front of us. We have this great pipeline. All of the stimulus programs we have put in place have generated fantastic results, particularly around fee-free TAFE. In some of the priority sectors where we desperately need workers the most, we are getting that great uptake of commencements.

As I said, this is one of the No. 1 priorities. It will be the subject of the VET review that I am sure the member is aware we are undertaking. We are also looking at some specific areas. The director-general and I convened a construction round table about a month ago. Even though the completion rates are quite high in construction relatively—at about 72 per cent—nevertheless, construction is such a priority in Queensland that we want to look at what else we can do. There is some good work being done but there is much work still to be done.

**Mr MICKELBERG:** Director-General, the train and retain initiative was announced in June last year. The latest national data shows that, for the 2022 calendar year, 1,300 more Queensland

construction trade trainees dropped out of their training than completed their training. That is 3,665 potential trainees who dropped out of training just in Queensland last year, and the minister alluded to those completions. What measures will be used to assess the effectiveness of the rehashed train and retain initiative?

**Mr Gee:** Can I try to provide some context. I do not want to take up too much time. Frankly, market conditions and the confidence to employ are key factors in retention of particularly young people—whether it is those in vocational training or those leaving the tertiary sector. For me—and it does not matter what I think; the incoming Reserve Bank board governor has said it very plainly—we have a once-in-a-generation opportunity to keep unemployment at record lows. That is a great thing for the state. Youth unemployment in this state has dropped from 14.6 per cent to 8.2 per cent. We have got the lowest unemployment rate we have ever had since the series started. We have got a record number—the highest in a decade—in terms of apprentices and trainees, but we need to continue to make sure that we are evaluating everything we do to make sure we keep those young people there.

For me though, the productivity gain of any training needs to be matched, and that is something I think we need to do more independent research on. Completions being higher would be great, but those completions are not wasted. For me, there are many choices. As I look around the room, I do not think in our lifetime I have seen it so good for young people, particularly those in very vulnerable groups, to be able to move into employment. That brings with it great challenges for us. Even though we have got the highest number of apprentices and trainees in training for a decade, there is a challenge. If you are getting \$13 to \$20 an hour and you can walk out and get employment somewhere else, that is a real challenge, particularly for smaller businesses.

The minister has already talked about the great work we are doing as a basis with the Workforce Strategy. Then there will be the vocational education and training strategy. The department supports those programs. Completions can be impacted by the entire economic cycle. In Queensland's forwards though, the forecast is for growth. We hope unemployment will stay as low as it possibly can. For me though, where we need to head is to evaluate that along with the small business strategy being developed later in the year.

**Mr MICKELBERG:** Director-General, I am keen to know what measures of effectiveness you will use to assess these initiatives? There are lots of words and lots of initiatives. How will you assess whether or not they are effective? If I go back to the construction example, 3,600 young Queenslanders dropped out of a construction traineeship or apprenticeship last year. They are all people who have made a choice, as per your contribution there, but have dropped out. How will you assess success? Is success 3,600 people dropping out of a construction traineeship? I would suggest it is not, but how will you assess the success of the initiatives you are talking about?

**Mr Gee:** We will work from the national level down with the recently established Jobs Skills Australia who do excellent modelling. We will work with the Commonwealth and all the other jurisdictions. It is a national issue; we all know that. We will work with all of the options we have. We have Jobs Queensland, a statutory entity, a wonderful board and we are in the market for refreshing that board and adding to that board. They do excellent modelling. I know the committee should be well aware and I am happy to point them in the direction of all of the publications they have done in the last year or two years. In terms of modelling and the work we do in that regard, that gives us a good base for understanding the market.

In terms of industry advice, I have already talked about some of those things. The SDS targets—because I am a new director-general, I have read through them—read collectively paint a picture that actually calls out for performance. I have listened to the members' questions in the past, and I think you are right to focus on evaluation. I would say we have strong modelling, and if those performance indicators in the SDS are read together, it is clear that we should stick with stretch targets. Some of them are stretch targets that have not been met for a number of years, but I am very happy—I cannot see any evidence that would point us in a different direction other than trying to achieve those targets that are in the SDS.

**Mr MICKELBERG:** Does the department have a date when the objective is that less people drop out of a construction traineeship than complete it? Do you have an objective?

**Mr Gee:** That is a really good question. It is an everyday. We should be striving for high performance every day. I will not accept anything less than that.

**Mr MICKELBERG:** But the government has not achieved it in the entirety of the time it has been in office. We also have to have a reality lens here. What actions are the department and the minister taking—this is to you, Director-General—to address the shortfalls? Eight years would suggest that what

we have been doing has not been working, and the minister even alluded to that in her opening statement.

**CHAIR:** Although, in fairness, the minister also alluded to some of the strategies that are being deployed. Director-General, would you like to respond?

**Mr Gee:** I think the Queensland Workforce Strategy clearly outlines a huge investment. A three-year action plan commits \$70 million to a range of initiatives to enable all Queenslanders to secure the work they want and to support employers to grow a more diverse workforce. This is in addition to the almost \$1.3 billion we have committed this year alone in skills and training initiatives. We have implemented a range of activities through the workforce strategy. For me, those workforce strategy actions align very clearly with the Queensland Training Ombudsman's review of support, particularly that provided to Queensland apprentices and trainees.

I think the Train to Retain strategy really got off to a great start, particularly the work we are doing in terms of mentoring women and the recent announcements in that regard. I have had the privilege of sitting and listening to apprentices with the minister, and a range of stakeholders—unions, employee representatives and independently chaired apprenticeship advisory reference group. It supports how we improve apprenticeship participation. Lots of good ideas there. The establishment of the Queensland Group Training program and the pre-apprenticeship programs to support additional apprenticeship opportunities is something else we are doing. I mention all of the staff, not just in my department, but in other departments, but particularly our departments in the regions that provide direct contact. I think the minister has already mentioned those 4,400 contacts we have already made.

Also, I think it is important to understand that the department alone—just the department alone—has reached to over 6.7 million users—6.7 million users or direct contacts—through its website, through Business Queensland, through its digital direct, through its hotline and telephone. The page views in those places are in the tens of millions. There is effectively a communication strategy there that is significant.

**Mr MICKELBERG:** Director-General, in the 2021-22 budget, the government's target for apprentice completions was 11,500, but the government only delivered 10,300. In 2022-23, the target was 11,500 apprenticeship completions, but only 9,800 were delivered. You described them as stretch targets, I think, in your previous answer, but can you explain how those target numbers have been arrived at?

**Mr Gee:** It is a good question. I had the opportunity to read the previous director-general's response and I think your questions last year around modelling were appropriate and on the money, for want of a better term. I have already talked about the modelling. If I understand your question correctly, you are questioning whether those targets will ever be met and whether the targets should remain?

**Mr MICKELBERG:** They never happen. That is the cut and thrust of the question.

**Mr Gee:** I cannot find any evidence that suggests we should reduce the target. That would in my view—a very strong view—not setting us up for the skills that we need. If we are to have a productive economy, we are clearly going to need them as we transition. Queensland, though, has seen a 15.3 per cent increase in 2022 compared to 2021. It is the highest number of completions since 2015. Economic cycles move up and down. I do not think I will repeat what I said in terms of where we are as an opportunity, but for me, it is important to note that there are so many factors in the economic cycle and variables that the department can only influence what it can do. We should continue to strive to do that as best we can. I think it is also important to recognise that VET in Queensland is a demand-driven cycle and system, and that funding and training places are not limited or capped. We are doing everything we possibly can. There is always more to learn in terms of evidence research.

**Mr MICKELBERG:** Director-General, I do not want to paraphrase you, but just so I am clear, that 11,500 apprenticeship completions is what is assessed by the department as being required for the Queensland economy; is that a fair statement?

**Mr Gee:** I think it is fair to suggest that 11,500 is a reasonable target for us to try to achieve, but I think it is also reasonable to say that a 15 per cent increase inside 12 months and a record level of apprentices and trainees—the largest number in a decade—is exciting, but I will put it into the context of an economic cycle where youth unemployment is at record lows.

**Mr MICKELBERG:** When you cite the 15 per cent number you just cited there, what are you actually citing? I explicitly ran off some numbers to you around the fact that completions for apprentices

went from 10,300 in 2021-22 down to 9,800 in the last financial year. You have said they have increased by 15 per cent. Where is the difference there, Director-General?

**Mr Gee:** To make it clear, that 15.3 per cent is from NCVET data and it refers to increases in apprentices and trainees combined in the 2022 calendar year compared to 2021.

**Mr MICKELBERG:** That goes to the cut and thrust of the issue, Director-General. We are talking about apprenticeships versus a combined apprentice and trainee number. There are clearly some significant issues in certain industry areas like construction. The trade areas are where there are some of the worst completion numbers. If we look at school-based apprenticeships and traineeships, which is an area the government has placed emphasis on, in the last financial year, the government fell short of the target by 1,300. The target was 5,000 and it delivered 3,700. Surely we are dealing with a pipeline there of students that are relatively easy to predict. We are not talking about workforce there, we are talking about school-based apprenticeships. Over the last eight years, the government has never met that target—never met that school-based apprenticeship completion target. How can the government continue down a path—and I am not asking for an opinion. What actions are the department taking to ensure that we do not continue down a path of not meeting a target which is presumably arrived at because there is a need in the economy?

**Mr Gee:** Again, I will repeat: we need to make sure that we have skills for the future. It is a very contested market; young people have a whole range of different choices. From what I can see, 46.7 per cent of national SATs are well above our working-age population share of 20 per cent. School-aged children respond to leadership mentoring. The GIS program is a fantastic program. Off the top of my head from memory, if we just looked at agriculture, there are 74 schools in that place. We are leading in terms of hydrogen and energy skills transition. It is always a challenge when young people in a market cycle have lots of choices. Work is important, but we actually lead the nation, particularly in VETs in schools.

**Mr SULLIVAN:** My question is of the minister. Can the minister please provide the committee an update on the QVET strategy?

**Ms FARMER:** I thank the member for his question. I first flagged that we would launch a review of vocational education and training in Queensland when I launched the Queensland Workforce Strategy last year. This will now be the most significant review of vocational education and training in Queensland for 14 years. Now that we are in the phase of working alongside the Commonwealth government to negotiate a new skills agreement in Queensland—and it is a government which is as invested in skills and training as we are here in Queensland—we will look at finalising that review when we know what our funding base is going to be from the Commonwealth.

VET is in everybody's life. Every single day every single one of us has contact with at least one person who has a VET qualification. Whether it is the barista who serves the coffee, the childcare worker where you drop off your babies, the aged care worker who looks after your grandmother in the nursing home or the car mechanic who works on your car, they affect our life in every way. We know that when we look at projections over the next two years, eight of the 10 priority jobs will be supported by VET qualifications. It is absolutely critical to our economy.

We know that we need to look at not only what jobs we need now but what jobs we need in the future. We also know that we need to look at what skills are required in each region. Queensland is such a vast and decentralised state. In fact, at every meeting of the national skills ministers my first comment when we are at the negotiating table is to recognise that Queensland has particular needs because of the number of rural and remote communities and the number of discrete Indigenous communities where it is often quite difficult to deliver vocational education. It is certainly very expensive. In Queensland our fundamental principle for vocational education is that no matter who you are or where you are in Queensland, you deserve the same access to a high-quality vocational education.

The VET review and getting it right will be absolutely critical. It is why we have to base all of our decisions on good data. That is why I am very pleased to announce today the new projections from Jobs Queensland on anticipating future skills. Members may be aware that Jobs Queensland is very well regarded for these data forecasts and they are the basis on which we make many decisions. This is the first public airing of the headline figures from those projections. They are saying to us that we will have created 207,000 new jobs by 2025-26. That is in the next two years. Members might be aware that since COVID we have created 278,000 jobs. We know that one in three new jobs in Queensland will require a vocational education and training qualification.

We are looking at what sectors are going to have the greatest growth and, for the committee's interest, the top five are: health care and social assistance, 16.4 per cent growth; professional, scientific



and technical services, 12.6 per cent growth; accommodation and food services, 10 per cent growth; education and training, 9.9 per cent; and transport, postal and warehousing, 8.4 per cent. Then we can look at the six fastest regions. I know the member for Rockhampton is going to be interested in this. Wide Bay is at the top with 13.6 per cent growth; Sunshine Coast, 12.5 per cent; Townsville, 12 per cent; Central Queensland, 11.5 per cent—I am sure the member for Rockhampton would love to take the credit for all of that—and Moreton Bay and Toowoomba tie at 10.4 per cent. These figures are going to inform the work that we do on the VET review. As I mentioned before, we spend \$1.2 billion per annum on vocational education and training in Queensland and we need to be absolutely sure that every dollar we spend—and we have talked about the workforce this morning. It is already critical but it is even more critical now that we are able to fill those jobs.

In terms of some of the other reasons we need to do this VET review, one of them is around—in fact, the member for Buderim raised this—success for our school students. We actually lead the way in Queensland in VET. We have 55 per cent of the nation's school-based apprenticeships and traineeships. We lead VET in schools with almost 40 per cent of national enrolments. We need to be sure that that investment results in jobs and future training that meet the need for the jobs of the future and gives those young people those opportunities. We know that financial sustainability for TAFE is always a challenge as a public provider. It must deliver in very thin markets. It must support the government's mandate that whoever you are or wherever you are in Queensland, you deserve that high-quality vocational education. We are working on that to make sure we have aligned funding and market settings to support TAFE. For example, a Certificate III in Early Childhood Education and Care in South-East Queensland costs just over \$3,500 to deliver. It costs \$8,900 in the Torres Strait. These are matters we have to address.

We have a discussion paper out at the moment. We have a VET reference group, and I want to thank those people for agreeing to inform me. The survey closes on 18 August. I want to thank the committee for the work that you are doing currently to look at the provision of VET in North Queensland.

**CHAIR:** We have just come back from the Torres Strait, so we totally appreciate what you are doing.

**Ms FARMER:** Excellent. I very much look forward to your recommendations. We ask all members to encourage people they know, whether they are parents, teachers, trainers or employers, to please take part in this. It affects everyone. It is absolutely critical and we want to get as much input as possible.

**CHAIR:** I have a question with regard to giving the committee an update on the delivery of fee-free TAFE across Queensland. I have had the opportunity to have a good look at it on the back of some research, so I am keen to hear about fee-free TAFE.

**Ms FARMER:** I thank the member for her question. I have actually lost count of the number of times I have been out to Alexandra Hills TAFE and I know how passionate you are about that. We have worked with the Commonwealth government to offer fee-free places this year. The Commonwealth government went to the last election promising fee-free TAFE places, and the first announcement they made in the skills and training portfolio was an allocation of those places in the first year while we actually work on the longer term national skills agreement. Queensland's share was 37,000 fee-free TAFE places and we surpassed that number in May. We really wanted to be able to say today that we were the first state to do so, but we could not quite clinch that.

**CHAIR:** Who beat us?

**Ms FARMER:** We do not know if anyone beat us, but we do not know if they did not beat us either. We have been absolutely delighted. There is still some funding left in the kitty and that will be available until the end of the year. We know that Queensland will get a share of the 300,000 fee-free TAFE places that the Commonwealth government announced in May. That is for 87 priority qualifications. We need to make sure that if we are offering those places they are going to fulfil the need for the jobs that are in most demand now and in the future.

We know that people are getting training now that they would never have been able to get before. If you get the right training, you are more likely to get the right job. So people are getting opportunities now that they never would have. Given the challenges of cost of living at the moment, it has become absolutely critical. The top five free qualifications that the committee might like to know about are: Certificate III in Electrotechnology Electrician, Certificate IV in Accounting and Bookkeeping, Certificate III in Carpentry, Certificate III in Early Childhood Education and Care and Certificate III in Plumbing. Chair, would you like to hear some facts about the Alexandra Hills TAFE?

**CHAIR:** You know I would.

**Ms FARMER:** I thought that would be the case! Some 467 Redlands constituents commenced Fee Free TAFE between 1 January this year and the end of June. The highest uptake at the Alexandra Hills TAFE was a Certificate III in Plumbing, a Certificate III in Electrotechnology Electrician and the Diploma of Nursing—and, of course, we have the excellent new facilities there. We have had free TAFE and apprenticeships in Queensland for a number of years now and we estimate that we have supported over 66,000 apprentices and trainees to undertake fee-free training since 2018, so that makes a significant impact on the participation of Queenslanders in the economy.

**CHAIR:** Definitely. It is interesting that the Diploma of Nursing has come at the Alexandra Hills TAFE. I think that can be largely attributed to the upgrade to that facility.

**Ms FARMER:** Yes, I am sure you are right.

**Mr O'ROURKE:** Minister, with such an amazing increase in the number of commencements in training over the past two years, can the minister provide the committee with how the government is addressing the completion rates?

**Ms FARMER:** Obviously completion rates are on everybody's mind with such a significant investment in skills and training. We need to know not only that those apprentices and trainees as human beings are supported to complete such an important undertaking, but with workforce shortages being such a challenge, we need to know that all of the work that we have done to increase commencements is going to result in completions and those people going into the workforce. We have 93,400 apprentices and trainees in training in Queensland—the highest June level for a decade. There has been an increase of 134 per cent in the last two years.

Nationally there has been a decline in completions over the last 10 years of 35.4 per cent. We are bucking that trend in Queensland, with a 16.4 per cent increase the year before last and an 11.1 per cent increase in 2022-23. Our completion rate in Queensland is 57.6 per cent, which is above the national completion rate of 55.7 per cent. In some particular courses, the member might be interested to know, the completion rate is 89.6—I think I said 42-something before. We all know how desperately early childhood workers are needed. For the Certificate III in Business, there has been a 42.5 per cent increase in completions. For the Certificate III in Electrotechnology Electrician, there has been a 12 per cent increase compared to the previous year, and they already have quite a high completion rate.

I referred before to the investigation I asked the Queensland Training Ombudsman to undertake to look at what the barriers are for apprentices and trainees. The QTO is obviously here today. He made 12 recommendations, which we have accepted. I have appointed an apprentice advisory board. It is chaired by Amanda Yeates from the Sunshine Coast and it comprises employers, union and industry reps and, most importantly, young apprentices. We want to look at how we are implementing those recommendations, and at new ideas moving forward. I referred before to the work that we have done to make sure that apprentices know who they can turn to and what their rights are. As a result of the work being undertaken, we are not only actively working with employers to make sure that they are aware of what their responsibilities are but also specifically targeting employers who are doing the wrong thing.

A significant part of that strategy is about supporting women in male-dominated occupations. It is crazy to have 50 per cent of the population missing out and not being given opportunities. We know, for instance, that in construction the number of women in construction has doubled in the last 10 years from two to four per cent. That is pathetic, so we are actively now working with the worst offenders in the male-dominated trades. I say that respectfully, but they are working with us to address that and they see the need. I thank them for that collaboration. It is why I was delighted to be able to announce a \$4.6 million investment in the budget for mentoring women in male-dominated trades. It is a complex issue and we must approach it from different angles, but I have been very pleased to see increases in Queensland because of a concerted effort.

**Mr DAMETTO:** That is a perfect segue. We do not want to talk about 'farmer wants a wife', but 'farmer wants a machinery operator'. We want to see male-dominated industries attract some more women—that is great. My question is in regard to question on notice No. 877. In your answer, you responded with—

Over the past five years in the North Queensland region, two students from Charters Towers campus, two students from Walkamin campus and two students from Cairns campus have successfully completed a Certificate III in Agriculture at TAFE Queensland.

I know there will be some significant infrastructure upgrades for TAFE Queensland to look after the agricultural sector, but what is the specific process that TAFE is going to undertake to attract more people into the agriculture sector and, therefore, train them in those certificates.

**Ms FARMER:** I will get a copy of that question on notice, which I am sure someone will give me in a moment. I do not know if it is worthwhile referring you to Mr John Tucker, who is the CEO. I will make a couple of statements. Agriculture has been identified as a priority industry in our training packages and in our emerging industry initiatives. In fact, we have agriculture as one of the 11 programs through our Gateway to Industry Schools program. I may in a moment get some figures on that. That is overseen by the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries. I think the member and I may have had a conversation previously about the very real need to be targeting school students to actually be making career choices in particular industries.

With the Gateway to Industry Schools program we know that if school students have real experience of an industry, then they are more likely to choose a career path in that industry. I think that is an important part of it and certainly a real focus area. That is an incredibly successful program, so that is a start. The department works very closely with those sectors, because it is one of the most important sectors in Queensland, so I might refer you to the director-general, but also to Mr John Tucker.

**Mr Gee:** I will be as quick as I can, but agriculture is a bit of a passion for me. Clearly under that VET emerging industries initiative which is \$15 million, \$5 million has been allocated to an agribusiness strategy. It consists of \$2 million for an agriculture skills fund, \$2 million to TAFE for an agricultural, rural and regional strategy and, importantly, a \$1 million beef processing skills fund.

We have entered into service level agreements with the Queensland Farmers' Federation—they are a good organisation to work with—to the value of \$850,000 to deliver two projects that aim to increase technological capacity in the ag sector and to assist farmers in the uptake of new technologies. Another suite of value projects of around \$2 million have been funded. They go across the entire value chain, from product development for virtual reality and augmented reality training products for the agrifood sector. TAFE are updating some qualifications to include training on new technologies that incorporate online interactive training, and it is actually really good to use. Through the minister, we would be more than happy, I am sure, to arrange a viewing of that sort of technology and how it is used to train but also to see it in real life in the value chain.

The QFF engages with a whole range of employers, small businesses and industry stakeholders because they are a peak of peaks and are doing a great job. They are covering the following sectors: agriculture, animal care and management, agriculture and fishing, conservation and land management, forestry, horticulture, irrigation—I know your electorate well and of course the sugar industry will not miss out—landscape, construction and primary industries. The gateway program is in 74 schools across the state. I will stop there. I am very conscious of the committee's time, particularly if Mr Tucker would like to add value.

**CHAIR:** Welcome to the CEO of TAFE Queensland. Congratulations, John!

**Mr Tucker:** Thank you, Chair, for your best wishes. If I can add to the minister's and the DG's comments, I can say from a personal perspective, with some ties to the agricultural industry, that it is something that is close to my heart, as it is for many Queenslanders. In terms of attraction to that industry, the very new facilities that I might talk about very briefly certainly will be attracting people because of the new facilities themselves but also what led to those facilities is deep interaction with the industries themselves and ensuring that it is a much more attractive industry to get into.

**Mr DAMETTO:** Hopefully we can attract more than 1.2 people a year to complete that course in North Queensland.

**Mr Tucker:** Absolutely; agreed. Just to outline some of the programs that we do offer, TAFE Queensland offers a range of other training and skills that support the agricultural industry—not just qualifications but also skills sets, things like tractor skills that the member referred to earlier, chemical applications for agriculture operating side by side and utility vehicles. All of these things are inside the scope of TAFE Queensland and offered around the state, but I referred to some of those new facilities that we are very thankful and appreciative to the state government to have. The Toowoomba Rural Centre of Excellence opened in 2019 and since then almost 2,000 students have passed through its doors. Many of those students have gone on to secure jobs in farming and the cattle industry, veterinary practice, horticulture, all manner of areas of the agricultural sector. The new Agricultural Centre of Excellence at the Bowen campus has also enabled TAFE Queensland to meet the rapidly changing needs of the ag sector in North Queensland. That state-of-the-art centre of excellence was officially opened just in January this year and it is assisting to upskill its workforce and provide opportunities, skills and pathways for students as well.

**CHAIR:** Terrific.

**Mr DAMETTO:** Back to the agribusiness Gateways to Industry Schools program, I know it is being managed by the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries but it is being paid for by employment, small business and training. Are we able to quantify how many out of those 74 schools across Queensland are in North Queensland and which schools have taken up the program?

**Ms FARMER:** I will have to defer to the DG for that detail.

**Mr Gee:** Chair, Member and Minister, if it is okay, we will get that to you before the end of the session. I should know the number off the top of my head, sorry.

**Mr DAMETTO:** That is okay; thank you. With reference to page 9 of the SDS, will the minister advise if the state has considered implementing specific apprenticeships targeting the agricultural industry to try and attract people to the industry and therefore work long term?

**Ms FARMER:** After we launched our Queensland workforce strategy, the agricultural sector was the first sector to work with us and work with Jobs Queensland on a workforce plan and I helped to launch that plan. It was not long after the workforce strategy, and I want to really compliment Jo Sheppard, the CEO of AgForce in Queensland, for the great work that that whole organisation has done knowing that it is a sector with an ageing workforce and with rapidly changing skills, including a requirement to develop much more technical skills. I am not sure if the member has—

**Mr DAMETTO:** I have.

**Ms FARMER:** You have. It is an excellent body of work and so we are working alongside them. These need to be partnerships because government cannot do it alone. These need to be partnerships with the industry sectors to address not only skills and training issues but circumstances for the people who are undertaking that training, what skills will be required in the future and where they will be required. We would certainly be working closely with any sector in addition for work like the excellent work I have just outlined today from Jobs Queensland to look at where the need is in each region—not only what sectors are going to be most in demand but also skills sets. For instance, we can see from the Jobs Queensland data what level qualifications are going to be needed in what sectors. That sort of data is really important and that is the sort of data that JQ has been able to provide to AgForce, but I will also refer you then to the DG for some other detail.

**Mr Gee:** I will be very quick, Chair. We have a demand-led system. I know the department of agriculture invests considerably in the Queensland agricultural workers network. It has been very effective at placing workers where they are needed, and Queensland has led the way in that regard. The skills that agriculture needs and your electorate in particular needs apply across the entire value chain, not just for agriculture but they are a great base for many of our emerging industries. To be specific about agriculture, we have invested \$21.79 million for the delivery of primary industries training for over 10,000 students—about 10,081 students—in 2021-22. In 2022-23 our estimated actual spend will be about \$22.17 million for a further 9,521 students.

**Mr DAMETTO:** With reference to the current skills shortage across the whole of Queensland, can the minister advise what incentives have been put in place to support mature age apprentices who wish to either upskill or cross-skill into different sectors?

**Ms FARMER:** In fact, our programs have really broadened to really target workers who have traditionally been disadvantaged in the workforce, so our workforce strategy specifically targets those groups—that is, not only workers over 55 but long-term unemployed people from multicultural backgrounds, First Nations people and women with small children. These are the people, including the group you referred to—mature age workers—whom we are absolutely targeting. We know there are about 180,000 people in Queensland who currently could work but who face barriers, and the group that the member refers to is one of those.

Our Workforce Connect Fund, which was one of the flagship programs coming out of the Queensland workforce strategy, directly invited peak bodies to apply for funding of up to \$1 million to target those workers who face employment barriers to get them into the workforce and supported employers to take them into the workforce. A range of peak bodies applied and there were 16 projects. This is a new project that has never been done before. Someone here may be able to tell me, but I cannot recall whether one of the agriculture related industries was successful, and perhaps someone could tell me that in a moment.

If they missed out on an application this time, certainly we are working very closely with them. It is specifically about that, which will include not only supporting employers to be willing to take on those people, in apprenticeships or in some sort of workforce role, but also what training and skills support is available to them to upskill or cross skill, so to look at the training needs. In many instances they may

have come from one completely different industry and moved to another. In fact, looking at the Queensland Energy and Jobs Plan we have specifically articulated that many of the workers coming out of the traditional energy industry, for instance, may want to cross skill or have microcredentials. It is the same principle. But it is really important to encourage employers to be also willing to take them on as well. Can I also say that we have a mature age apprentice on our apprenticeship advisory board to advise me on those specific things. I would be happy to offer a briefing to the member to have a look at what is being done in that space, and particularly in the agriculture sector, acknowledging your interest. I do not know if the DG wanted to add anything to that?

**Mr Gee:** Just very quickly, thanks, Minister. We take an all-ages approach, of course. I think the numbers would reflect that. There is a list of funded projects for a whole range—a private briefing might be useful—but there is Motor Trades Association of Queensland; Civil Contractors Federation; the LGAQ, of course, are doing great work, particularly in the north with them; the Housing Industry Association; Screen Queensland; Queensland Shelter Inc., PeakCare, Active Queenslanders Industry Alliance Limited; Timber Queensland; Queensland Chamber of Commerce and Industry Ltd.; Regional Development Australia Darling Downs & South West Inc.; Autism Queensland; the Australian Retailers Association; Australian Meat Industry Council; Queensland Resources Council as examples of the things we are doing in terms of trying to connect and provide support. And, of course, there is all the regional support we provide no matter the age of the apprentice or the trainee. I think the minister has referenced those numbers already.

**Mr LISTER:** I want to talk about the Queensland College of Wine Tourism. I know that you and Mr Koch are very aware of the importance of that to my community—

**CHAIR:** We all are!

**Mr LISTER:** We all are—and me and I am grateful for the partnership that the University of Southern Queensland has with the state government to maintain that facility. It is very important. I am not sure when the report is due back. There is a review going on. Can you explain what the state government would hope to achieve with QCWT in future bearing in mind some of the conversations we have had today about agricultural training and so forth? Currently it delivers a lot of great hospitality and tourism training, but can it be put to use to deliver some of those shortages in the communities that I represent? Is that something that is on the radar of the department?

**Ms FARMER:** No, and I thank the member for his question. Can I just acknowledge the productive working relationship I think we have all had over this and the many very good conversations. Your region could not ask for a better advocate for something which I know is iconic in the area. As you know, we currently are coming to the end of a process of looking at every aspect of the Queensland College of Wine Tourism. There obviously was one report which looked at the governance issues around the college, and that certainly made some important recommendations. I asked for there to be a broader look, not only at the operations of the college itself but also the financial arrangements. I want to acknowledge the important role that the University of Southern Queensland plays here and that they have been an important part of the history of the Queensland College of Wine Tourism and also the council and Mayor Pennisi have played a strong role there.

I wanted this work that has been done by external consultants to look at what are the needs of the region—certainly what is an effective business model, but what are the needs of the region, the training needs of the region, and I have already spoken a lot today about making sure that the training we provide is pertinent to that region. What is needed in your region is obviously different to what is needed in the member for Buderim's region or any of the other members' regions. Involving employers, industry, schools—there are some obviously excellent VET in Schools programs happening in your area—there is obviously some important work going on with schools, but I recall when Minister Grace and I visited the Queensland College of Wine Tourism, which I think was last year?

**Mr LISTER:** Not that long ago.

**Ms FARMER:** And we visited the students. I think they were undertaking a bottling and labelling activity, and I asked those students whether any of them were thinking that they would actually work in the wine industry and not one of them said yes and that is a significant industry, obviously, for your region. Even those matters: are the courses being provided there actually going to lead people to jobs in the region? I think that is our overarching focus. I understand the member has been on the reference group or consultation group for the consultants?

**Mr LISTER:** The independent reviewer has reached out to me and I was pleased to give them my views on that.

**Ms FARMER:** Thank you for your very frank views. I met with them this week to talk about where they were heading and I have asked them to be sure that they come up with some very specific recommendations. I am hoping that we will receive that report very soon and I certainly absolutely commit to the member, just as I have the whole way along, to make sure that I am speaking to you about what those recommendations are.

**Mr LISTER:** I appreciate that. If I could perhaps have a briefing down the track when it is all done I would be grateful.

**Ms FARMER:** Absolutely. That is a priority. My department and my office know that it is a priority to keep you in the loop.

**CHAIR:** Thank you, Minister. It really is a wonderful place.

**Mr LISTER:** We will get you there one day, Chair.

**CHAIR:** I have been there. Kangaroo pie and red wine. Member for Buderim?

**Mr MICKELBERG:** I have a question to the director-general. How many units of competency were delivered by Queensland training organisations in the last financial year?

**Mr Gee:** Bear with me. I will just get that detail.

**Mr MICKELBERG:** If it makes it easier, I am also going to ask how many were publicly funded.

**Mr Gee:** Chair, I am going hand to over to my associate director-general, please.

**Mr Koch:** Thank you, Director-General. The number of completed units of competency in the last financial year, viewed through our SDS measures, was just over 1,470,000.

**Mr MICKELBERG:** How many of those were publicly funded?

**Mr Koch:** I do not have the exact figure of that, but I can tell you that approximately 43 per cent of students were publicly funded in the last financial year.

**Mr MICKELBERG:** Director-General, why has the average cost per competency successfully completed jumped from \$730 in financial year 2021-22 to \$894 per competency in financial year 2022-23?

**Mr Gee:** When I first started as the director-general and I looked at that figure I made very thorough investigations into it. It strikes you prime facie 'why the rise?' I have looked back over the last 10 years and the price has fluctuated. In 2012-13, as an example, it was 725 and it has gone up and down over that time. We have already talked this morning in some of your other questions about the wonderful increase and support provided through Free Apprenticeships for Under 25s, JobTrainer and now Fee Free TAFE. That significant increase in investment—\$100 million over two years, I think; \$72 million in the last 12 months estimated actual—has had tremendous results. We have already talked about the 75,500 in 2021-22 in terms of record commencements, a 134 per cent increase compared to 2019-20.

That, combined with increasing training and upskilling opportunities across a huge state, means that costs have gone up. I think it is always good to come in afresh and look at the SDS measures. I think it is a very important measure. The way that traditionally it has been put together, our entire budget—which also includes Micro-credentialing Program and the Gateway to Industry Schools Program initiatives, which do not specifically relate to those training enrolments and therefore the competencies—is actually calculated within that. At the end of the day what I am trying to explain to the committee is that the real reason that that fluctuates, but in particular this year, has been the extraordinary successful investment in fee free TAFE, free apprenticeships under 25 and JobTrainer.

**Mr MICKELBERG:** Director-General, so I am clear, the TAFE Queensland measure—for the same measure, average cost per competency completed—was \$829 in the last financial year. The sector-wide measure is \$894 per competency completed. Is that because you are attributing the fee free TAFE, Gateway to Industry Schools and the other programs that you just mentioned to the broader vocational training sector as opposed to directly to TAFE? Fee free TAFE is clearly a TAFE program. Is that allocated to TAFE Queensland or is that allocated in the competency measure on page 9 of the SDS?

**Mr Gee:** Yes, we subsidise all of those and, of course, we are subsidising more because of fee free TAFE. We are subsidising not just the public sector but across the entire market.

**Mr MICKELBERG:** We are not attributing those costs, though, in the measure on page 17 of the SDS when we consider the average cost per competency delivered by TAFE Queensland; is that correct?

**Mr Gee:** Just bear with me for a second. I would hate to mislead the committee so could you repeat the question?

**Mr MICKELBERG:** The cut and thrust of the question, Director-General, is this: on page 17 of the SDS, the average cost per competency for TAFE Queensland is \$829 per competency. If we turn to page 9, the average cost per competency successfully completed—so the same measure for the system more broadly—is \$894. It is more to deliver a competency more broadly across the system than it is for TAFE. The justification for the increased cost is fee free TAFE amongst other things. My question is: has fee free TAFE, if we narrow it down to that, been allocated against TAFE Queensland or stripped out and allocated to the system more broadly as opposed to directly to TAFE Queensland?

**Mr Gee:** I am advised that we use the total figure in our budget as a straight line to develop the cost for the competency. It is a really astute question. I am advised that it is the entire budget that is allocated.

**Mr MICKELBERG:** Thank you.

**CHAIR:** We will shift to some government questions. Would the minister advise how the Palaszczuk government is investing in skills and training to ensure Queensland will have the skilled workforce it needs to reach 70 per cent renewable energy by 2032?

**Ms FARMER:** I acknowledge the chair's role and the role of the member for Rockhampton as hydrogen champions.

**CHAIR:** Thank you.

**Ms FARMER:** I know it is a topic dear to the hearts of all of the committee members in the government. We know that we are going to need new skills for the renewable energy workforce. We have the \$63 billion Queensland Energy and Jobs Plan that is going to support up to 100,000 jobs. My department is developing the Future Energy Workforce Roadmap as a key action of the Queensland Energy and Jobs Plan, which will be released later in the year. We have consulted across the state on that strategy with 90 different industry, union, education, skills and training, and regional economic bodies. That has really highlighted what the unique opportunities and priorities are, again, in various regions across the state. We are looking at addressing the workforce needs of this and other emerging industries. I referred earlier to the fact that there will be a whole lot of new jobs and new skills that we currently cannot necessarily describe.

**CHAIR:** It was a topic of conversation last week at the national Hydrogen Forum, I can tell you, Minister.

**Ms FARMER:** Absolutely. In terms of the hydrogen industry in particular, Queensland was the first to deliver a Queensland industry workforce road map. I was very pleased to present that at the clean energy conference, I think it was last year.

We are working with about 40 major projects around the state to literally look at what skills are required as the projects are developing. In many instances, we will actually be able to use the skills of existing workers like the plumbers and the electricians. All that may be required is microskilling, cross-skilling and upskilling. In some instances, they are completely new jobs and there is very little experience in the world for some of the skills that are going to be required. Much of our work, as I said, is about working with people as they develop so that we can map out those skills and there has been an excellent body of work there.

In readiness for the renewable energy industry, we have invested \$51.45 million in training infrastructure for this purpose. There is the \$17 million Pinkenba Renewable Energy Training Facility, supporting pre-trade apprenticeship and post-trade courses for up to 300 students. We invested \$20 million in the Hydrogen Centre of Excellence at PICAC in Beenleigh. That has training capacity for up to 1,100 people. There is the \$12.45 million upgrade for the Hydrogen and Renewable Energy Training Facility at Townsville's Bohle TAFE, which is due for completion later this year. I was very pleased to visit Gladstone State High School, with the member for Gladstone, just several months ago to look at the new hydrogen training hub that we have there for local schools and the local jobs program. We need to prepare students for the hydrogen industry.

I was referring earlier to the Gateway to Industry Schools Program being really critical to the agriculture industry because we know that if students actually have real-life experience in an industry they are more likely to choose that career path. We have added hydrogen to the Gateway to Industry Schools Program. Already, 32,000 students a year go through the GISP and we will have around 2,000 students actually in schools across the state doing the hydrogen GISP. In fact, we would have had more because the demand was actually so high.

**CHAIR:** I am encouraging all in my electorate to look at the opportunities.

**Ms FARMER:** Absolutely. Member, I know we have had a number of conversations about that. We are looking at opening those rounds again by the end of the year. I encourage all members to ensure their schools are aware of just how important that program is.

We have also funded, under our emerging skills program, some specific projects to make sure that we are seeing real-life projects taking place and are able to map the skills as we go. I refer in particular to a project that we funded between CS Energy, TSBE and Construction Skills Queensland for a new green hydrogen plant at Kogan Creek. Not only were they able to map those skills but they were also able to work with small businesses so that they could actually see how they could be an important supply chain to that facility. That is the sort of work that we will also be wanting to do with the Queensland Energy and Jobs Plan where there are regions that have a real focus on that new training.

I also want to announce today something that we promised in the hydrogen workforce road map, that is, we would pilot a hydrogen-specific online learning program for high school students that builds awareness of industry and foundational skills, including in STEM. I want to announce today that we have actually launched that.

**CHAIR:** Excellent. Great news.

**Ms FARMER:** That is a microcredential that CQU has worked on with Stanwell Corporation and Acciona Energia. It is absolutely critical that we actually start with school students so that they know how exciting this industry is. I have heard the Minister for Energy say this, but I heard it the day we launched the hydrogen GISP at Parliament House. When talking to the young people from, I think it was, Springwood high I asked them why they were so excited about picking up hydrogen learning at their school. One of them said, 'Where else do you get to work in an industry where you can save the planet?' I think it is going to be a great incentive for young people. There is lots happening in infrastructure training, but it is mapping this challenging but hugely exciting area for growth.

**CHAIR:** Terrific. Thanks, Minister.

**Mr O'ROURKE:** Minister, I know how important TAFE is to so many communities across the state. Can the minister please provide an update on how TAFE has helped regional, rural and remote Queenslanders into a job?

**Ms FARMER:** I know how passionate the member is about this. We have had many great visits in the Rockhampton electorate talking to people doing vocational education and talking to employers about their needs. I referred earlier to how important TAFE is to rural, regional and remote Queensland. It is why we are absolutely committed to having a public provider of vocational education and training in Queensland, so that whoever you are or wherever you are in Queensland you can have the same access to high-quality vocational education. TAFE Queensland has 60 different locations in Queensland. Obviously, we have CQU as a public provider. Their main operations are based in Rockhampton. There are over 100,000 students every year in TAFE training and there are 320 qualifications that can be attained and they are in just about every industry. It is why we are making sure that students right across Queensland have access. It is why we have a very strong and ambitious infrastructure program operating in this state. I have been absolutely delighted to visit a number of those facilities. We have committed about \$280 million to training infrastructure in every area of the state. Again, as I have said a number of times today, it is actually about what the region needs. Each region will be different. What the member's region needs will be different from what is needed in Townsville, the Gold Coast or Toowoomba.

I refer to some of those facilities. For instance, with the member for Hervey Bay I recently opened the Hervey Bay nursing and allied health upgrades at the Hervey Bay TAFE. We know that the Hervey Bay region has one of the highest number of seniors, if not the highest, so the health needs of that population certainly are very high in terms of nursing and allied health. That is why we upgraded those facilities in Hervey Bay. We know that Townsville is going to be one of the key centres for renewable energy in Queensland, which is why we are doing the new hydrogen and renewable energy training facility at Bohle TAFE and it is why we also will have an advanced manufacturing facility there.

I recently opened the Mount Isa engineering and welding workshop. I do not think anyone is in any doubt about what the industry and training needs are in Mount Isa. In Cairns, we announced the expansion of the Great Barrier Reef International Marine College—a \$16 million expansion out of the budget. If anyone gets a chance to go up there, it is simulated training. The Premier and I both visited. I must admit that I got a bit sea sick when I was doing it. These are fantastic facilities and a great



example of how when people study at TAFE they are job ready, which is why employers absolutely love TAFE graduates. They are job ready.

Mr Tucker referred just before to the Rural Centre of Excellence in Toowoomba. In Bowen we have the Agricultural Centre of Excellence. In Bundaberg we have the Advanced Manufacturing Skills Centre—and it is very clear why that is important—but also the agriculture and horticulture centre. Of course, in the member's electorate of Rockhampton we are looking at a consolidation of the campuses across CQU so we know that their facilities are absolutely focused on the needs of that region. There is something for every region, which is why it is absolutely critical that we continue to make that investment in infrastructure.

**Mr MICKELBERG:** Director-General, I have a question in relation to the Cleveland Education and Training Centre located at the Cleveland Youth Detention Centre. In 2022, how many students were enrolled in vocational education and training courses at that location?

**Mr Gee:** In the couple of minutes we have left I will attempt to try and get that but, if not, through the minister we may have to take that on notice. While I have the floor I can also answer Mr Dametto's question that he asked earlier. We do provide \$200,000 annually to the Department of Education to deliver those services. In fact, the minister and I were only up there recently watching a number of young people undertaking training that would lead to a cert I. In 2022, in terms of youth detention centres, there were 47 full qualifications, 489 units of competency and 1,058 statements of attainment.

**Mr MICKELBERG:** Thank you. I appreciate that.

**CHAIR:** Did you want to give the response to the member for Hinchinbrook?

**Mr DAMETTO:** Were you finishing the response?

**Mr Gee:** I have finished that response. I am very conscious of Mr Mickelberg's time.

**Mr DAMETTO:** Point of order: could you repeat that answer because I do not think it answered the question I asked previously.

**Mr Gee:** Sorry, that was Mr Mickelberg's.

**CHAIR:** That was the answer to Mr Mickelberg's question. Would the director-general now like to respond with the answer to the member for Hinchinbrook's question?

**Mr Gee:** Yes. Of the 74 schools, 15 are in North Queensland and Far North Queensland—All Souls St Gabriel's at Charters Towers, Ayr state high, Home Hill state hill, Ingham state high, Kirwan state high, northern beaches—which is north of Mackay—Proserpine state high and St Catherine's at Proserpine. Did I say Gilroy Santa Maria?

**Mr DAMETTO:** Not yet. I would appreciate it; it is my old school.

**Mr Gee:** There is also Gordonvale State High School, Herberton State High School, Malanda State High School, Tagai State College—which I think from memory is at Thursday Island—Tully state high and the Charters Towers School of Distance Education, if I missed it.

**Mr MICKELBERG:** Director-General, I appreciate that these programs are delivered by the Department of Education but, given that your department funds them, I think they are relevant. How many students who left the Cleveland Education and Training Centre prior to completing a qualification continued on training and then finished their qualification once they were released? I am happy for the response to be 'all children in a detention facility who have undergone training' if that is easier.

**Mr Gee:** To be frank, I think that is such a detailed question that we will have to go through a significant number of records to try to find it. We will try to do that this afternoon, but I am not sure that we will be able to, given there were 1,000 competencies. I am not sure we can access that without a really detailed search.

**Mr MICKELBERG:** I am happy for it to be taken on notice.

**CHAIR:** Did you want to try to do that by the end of the session?

**Mr Gee:** I actually think it is almost writing a specific script and getting individual young people's names. I would have to go through the system.

**Mr MICKELBERG:** I guess the intent of the question is to understand individuals who obviously are detained for a period of time and have access to training and how many of them continue on? I am just after a number. I do not really need to know that Billy—

**Mr Gee:** Or a rate.

**Mr MICKELBERG:** Or a rate. So that we can establish the effectiveness of the training delivered inside the youth detention facility and subsequently whether those young people continue on with that training, and, in particular, the numbers that do not.

**CHAIR:** That could change from course to course as well.

**Mr Gee:** I am right, I think, that it will be a very detailed request that will take us some time. We will have to try and take it on notice, if we can. It is quite detailed.

**Mr SULLIVAN:** Is it possible at all? In terms of funding from DESBT, you do not file people under the category of whether they have spent time in youth detention, do you?

**Ms FARMER:** Could we possibly, perhaps before the end of the hearing today, come back to the committee on what is involved and whether it is possible. We will do our best. If it is possible, could we perhaps seek an extension of time, because it just may not be something we can do? Would the member be happy with that?

**Mr MICKELBERG:** I am comfortable with that. If your answer is that you are unable to track those people after they leave the detention facility, that is an answer in and of itself. What I am trying to establish is whether or not it is effective and they continue through that training. Obviously if you are unable to track them, that raises separate questions. I am happy for you to come back later on.

**Ms FARMER:** Thank you for that.

**CHAIR:** It being four o'clock, that concludes our session on training and skills development.

**Proceedings suspended from 4.00 pm to 4.15 pm.**



**CHAIR:** I welcome back the minister, director-general and officials. The committee will now examine the estimates for the employment and small business portfolio areas until 5.15 pm. I call the member for Buderim.

**Mr MICKELBERG:** Minister, when I travel the state, small businesses constantly tell me about the impact that crime is having on their viability. Whether it is the impact through increased insurance premiums, interruption in their ability to trade or the impact on their staff, small business owners have told me that it is a real concern for them. My question is: why were questions about the impact of crime not included as part of the Small Business Strategy survey?

**Ms FARMER:** That is a very good question. In fact, as we are developing the strategy we will include that. The phase that is happening now is that we had, I think from memory, about 800 responses to the survey. We also have nine peak small business bodies who work with us to make sure they disseminate the information to their members. They provide us with strong feedback. Some of them are having their own online sessions. We are currently at the stage that the consultants we are working with are looking at the results of the survey and putting together some draft strategies based on feedback from that and our peak bodies. Then they will put that out for consultation to ensure we have hit the nail on the head. We are happy to include that.

**Mr MICKELBERG:** Director-General, do you know how many small businesses have been affected by crime in Queensland?

**Mr Gee:** The appropriate people to provide that statistic would be the Police Commissioner and the Minister for Police, I understand. I can add to the minister's answer to your previous question. There was an open-ended question in the survey that says 'Do you have any other comments/feedback on the issues impacting Queensland small business or how the Queensland government can better assist Queensland small businesses?' I reiterate what the minister said: we will be keenly and astutely focused on the question you have asked.

**Mr MICKELBERG:** Director-General, forgive me if I get my number wrong, but I think from the question on notice there were 61-odd people who filled out that section. How many people mentioned crime in their response?

**Mr Gee:** I will have to come back to the member with that. That is a very specific question.

**Mr MICKELBERG:** Director-General, with respect to the question on the number of businesses affected by crime, according to QPS data the offence of 'unlawful entry with intent—shop' increased by 41 per cent in the last financial year compared to the financial year prior. Given this is a significant increase year on year, I am keen to understand what actions your department has taken to ensure the impacts of crime do not continue to affect the viability of Queensland small businesses.

**Mr Gee:** Just bear with me for two seconds.

**CHAIR:** I note that crime prevention is a matter for the police portfolio. I am sure that you have something to contribute.

**Mr Gee:** That is what I was going to say, Chair, but I am more than happy to say that the Queensland budget 2023-24 provides \$132 million over four years to assist victims of crime and crime prevention support. Specifically when it comes to small businesses, I know there is a range of programs delivered by other agencies—Justice and Attorney-General, the Police Service. Of course, we provide the Small Business Wellness Package, an initiative administered by our department. We also work with the Queensland Mental Health Commission, the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries, the Department of Tourism, Innovation and Sport, Business Chamber Queensland and the Queensland Small Business Commissioner to make sure appropriate supports are in place. From memory, I understand that at least 320 people have been assisted in that regard in the last financial year. Of course, that program aims to support the mental wellness of Queensland small business owners and promote and improve access to available support services.

**Ms FARMER:** I wonder if I could just add something, if the director-general has finished?

**CHAIR:** Are you happy with that, member?

**Mr MICKELBERG:** Yes.

**Ms FARMER:** Earlier I referred to the nine small business peak bodies. Certainly even before we went out with the survey we spoke to them about what they thought the main themes should be. While I absolutely acknowledge that crime is raised by small businesses, probably the dominant issue was interest rate increases—the effect on people leasing and on customers actually having less to spend. I am informed that that is something that has been raised by the National Retail Association, which is one of those key bodies—you will appreciate that I do not get involved at every level of the conversations—and that we are waiting for them to come back to us with a proposal.

In the youth justice space we do actually fund some specific shopping centres where there have been issues identified. For example, in the member for Rockhampton's electorate we have just renewed funding for youth justice workers at the Stockland centre. It depends on the locality, but in a number of localities across the state where local police and youth justice workers identify that something in a shopping centre is an issue, then sometimes there is funding or sometimes it is part of the work. I know that in my own electorate Carindale is the main big shopping centre, and our local police work very closely with them on managing any youth offending. There is some good work happening across the state, but it is a good conversation and we will make sure that we interrogate that further.

**Mr MICKELBERG:** Minister, has consideration been given to providing financial support to small businesses so they can install CCTV or improve security measures to address areas where crime is an issue?

**Ms FARMER:** We will be talking a little bit more about this in the youth justice part of this portfolio. There has been a lot of work done around the impact of youth crime on victims. The committee travelled around the state and delivered a report with a range of recommendations. We are looking at how we can support victims. A couple of the recommendations that came out of that report are relevant to youth justice, and I will speak on those further in that portfolio examination. There are conversations within my department about recognising that victims are not just individuals. Obviously we have support for seniors with the counselling service and a range of initiatives; for example, people want to install immobilisers. We also see that small businesses are victims, so we will have an ongoing brief to look at what support is going to be best provided. We have information on our Business Queensland website in relation to crime prevention for small businesses, and we are speaking to the National Retailers Association about what is the best type of support for small businesses. We rely on those peak bodies to give us the best advice in addition to the work that our local staff do with their local businesses.

**Mr MICKELBERG:** Minister, I do not want to put words in your mouth, but just to be clear: you are considering measures, but there are no existing measures as it stands right now specifically for small business?

**Ms FARMER:** We recognise that businesses are also victims, which is why we work locally with them to make sure we are addressing their issues, but it will be an ongoing brief.

**Mr MICKELBERG:** Director-General, with reference to the state government's On-time Payment Policy, can you advise the committee of the number of instances that an undisputed small business invoice was not paid by a state government department within 20 days?

**Mr Gee:** The program has been operating for three years and it has seen increases in performance over this time. When comparing year-to-date performance: in 2021, 89.2 per cent of

invoices were paid on time: in 2021-22, 89.3 per cent of invoices of known small businesses were paid on time for quarters 1 to 3; and for 2022-23, 89.9 per cent of invoices from small businesses were paid on time from quarters 1 to 3.

**Mr MICKELBERG:** They are percentages, Director-General. Can you advise me of the number of instances where an undisputed small business invoice was not paid within 20 days?

**Mr Gee:** Can I try and provide that before the end of the session?

**Mr MICKELBERG:** Yes.

**Mr Gee:** To my knowledge, we have not had one complaint in that space.

**Mr MICKELBERG:** Director-General, I have a follow-up question. What action does the department take to ensure compliance with that policy across the whole of government?

**Mr Gee:** That is a great question. We have recently introduced a whole range of initiatives across government. My predecessor was on the board with fellow directors-general. He often talked to us about that, and we all gave a commitment. There are a whole range of systems in place. If we think about 245,000 public servants in a sector that reaches across the entire state, we are talking about individual two-person or single-person service delivery right through to the very top of the organisation. There have been some notable exceptions recently that show improvement. The chief finance officers across government have met, and they are looking at a whole range of systems. We need to be careful around cybersecurity. I know law enforcement agencies recognise that fraud and cybersecurity are the No. 1 threat across the western world. With that in the back of our mind we are still pushing through with system changes. I want to compliment Queensland Corrective Services, which has gone from 89.6 per cent to 93.5 per cent. They have taken a range of actions to result in improvements, including internal business process changes for more proactive management of registered small business vendor invoices—actually identifying the small businesses. They have sent those invoices to business area email boxes rather than individual employee emails—just a simple system change like that—and they have really pumped out internal communications, including the on-time payment procedure guide published on the department's intranet.

The former department of children, youth justice and multicultural affairs increased dramatically from 82.9 per cent to 89.5 per cent. There were a range of actions taken there, but the most notable ones were ensuring the accuracy of the invoice date from the supplier. In addition, the payment term was set to 'pay immediately' once the invoice was entered into the payment system, and there was targeted training for departmental officers who process and/or approve invoices. The Police Service, which has significant demand, has improved dramatically from 72 per cent to 73.9 per cent. Off their own bat their corporate people developed an invoice payment performance dashboard. There is performance required across agencies. There is always room for improvement. There is also a need for us to better identify small business vendors and payment systems across the board. That requires time and cost, but we will continue to work towards that.

**Mr MICKELBERG:** Director-General, I have a follow-up question. In relation to late payment under the state government's on-time payment policy, what amount of penalty interest was paid by the state government across all departments in the last financial year?

**Mr Gee:** Can I come back to you? I have the answer in my head but I do not want to put it out there.

There were no eligible claims for penalty interest. None. Zero.

**Mr MICKELBERG:** I note that you said in your previous answer that this was not an issue that was raised with the department—or words to that effect. You may have said just before that there were not any complaints. Every time an individual makes a claim in relation to nonpayment, they are required to put in an on-time payment claim form. Is that correct? Is that the process?

**Mr Gee:** Yes.

**Mr MICKELBERG:** So in every one of those instances, the individual is effectively making a complaint that they have not been paid within 20 days and that it is an eligible invoice.

**Mr Gee:** They do have to put a form in, yes. The answer I am giving you is they do have to put a form in.

**Mr MICKELBERG:** Which effectively forms a complaint.

**Mr Gee:** Not to my understanding—

**Mr MICKELBERG:** Not for the government's purposes?

**Mr Gee:** Not to my understanding. I will certainly go back and see whether we can improve the form if that is required, but I would have to drill down. We would want to go to the users as well. There is already enough red tape for small businesses. The whole aim is not to create more work for them but to reduce it. As of 30 June there were 6,540 small businesses listed on the register.

**Mr MICKELBERG:** Director-General, in every single quarter of the last financial year, your own department had instances where undisputed small business invoices were not paid in accordance with the state government's on-time payment policy. If the department of small business cannot make payment within 20 days, how can small business owners have confidence they will be paid on time by other government departments?

**Mr Gee:** There is always room for improvement. I am very proud to say, though, given system limitations and the cost and time it takes to improve, that the total percentage of late payments was 5.6 per cent for the department; 94.4 per cent were made on time. There have never been claims for penalty interest, but we will strive to get to 100 per cent.

**CHAIR:** Are invoices still received both digitally and in hard copy physical form?

**Mr Gee:** I would have to check with every department. If someone sent us a physical copy, it is a legal document and we would pay it.

**Mr MICKELBERG:** Chair, for what it is worth, there is a standard invoice that government seek payment on.

**CHAIR:** Thank you, member for Buderim.

**Mr MICKELBERG:** I turn now to red-tape reduction. Director-General, we frequently hear about the Business Launchpad as being a red-tape reduction initiative. However, that Business Launchpad only helps new businesses identify existing red-tape requirements. What regulatory requirements have been removed or reformed as a consequence of the Business Launchpad?

**Mr Gee:** Under the released Better Regulation Update 2023, there are a whole range of actions and reforms that have been outlined. We have delivered payroll tax relief to small and medium businesses to keep business costs low, including extending the one per cent regional pay tax discount until 30 June 2030. We have assisted 2,177 small businesses, particularly through the Queensland Small Business Commissioner. We have supported over 87,000 users through the Queensland Business Launchpad, resulting in \$44.7 million in time savings for business. We have signed up 45 councils to the Small Business Friendly program to reduce red tape between small business and local government, 80 per cent of Queensland small businesses. We have released the Queensland Outdoor Activation Action Plan to improve the regulatory framework supporting outdoor activation. We have continued to implement the Regulator Performance Framework requiring regulators to publicly report on regulatory performance. We have made it easier to do business with government, with \$5.78 billion invested in small and medium enterprises through procurement opportunities in 2021 under the 30 per cent SME procurement target.

It is a pleasure to deal with the people who are represented on the Queensland Small Business Advisory Council to hear directly from small business. They are very frank in their advice to us. We have delivered seven significant digital regulatory reform projects as part of the \$60.1 million small business regulatory reform agreement, including the Business Launchpad. We also have the VET Informed Consumer project, the Farm check-in app and The Food Pantry portal.

We continue to work with the Office of Best Practice Regulation to implement small business friendly regulator practices and identify reform opportunities. We are always open to hear more about that. For example, we are working with the office and other Queensland government agencies on exploring opportunities to utilise regulation technology, regtech, solutions to streamline regulatory processes, with the advent of AI and a whole range of new technologies, always bearing in mind cybersecurity and fraud. We will look to make sure compliance requirements for small businesses are made as easy as they can. We have already spoken about a new small business strategy that will be released in late 2023. There has been significant consultation there. Red tape will always come up, but we hope through that strategy that the minister will be announcing significant work before the end of the year.

**Mr O'ROURKE:** Minister, we know that workforce shortages are a challenge in every region and in every industry. Can the minister please update the committee on what the government is doing to make sure there is a plan to address regional workforce needs?

**Ms FARMER:** That is a really important question. In the feedback at our first Queensland Workforce Summit last year and during the consultations up to the release of the Queensland Workforce

Strategy, five major themes emerged that should direct our work. I have referred to some of them today, including low participation groups and encouraging those skills and training school-based transitions into the workforce.

One of the key ones was actually a place-based response to workforce solutions. We have already talked today about how important it is to design our strategies and programs based on the needs of a local region because what is needed in your region is obviously going to be different to Mackay, Mount Isa or Goondiwindi. It is important that we have decisions and programs that are based on what the jobs are going to be in the future, what is the jobs growth, what are the employer expectations, what is happening around education and what are the needs of the region. In our Workforce Strategy Action Plan, we have outlined a number of actions that address that.

One of the ones I like to talk about in particular is the Regional Jobs Committees. We have nine of these operating. There is one operating in the chair's area and they are operating in various locations across the state. They were set up at a time when unemployment was high, and obviously they are now operating at a time when unemployment is exceptionally low, so much so that workforce shortages are now an issue. As they have developed, we have seen there was a need to revisit the way they operate so they are focused on the current needs—so the governance is right and they are truly representative of the key people in their regions. I asked my previous director-general to commission a review of the Regional Jobs Committees and the way they operate. If any members had Regional Jobs Committees—and I cannot recall whether that was any of the members opposite—they were invited to give their feedback as important stakeholders. They will be refocused.

I am very pleased to announce today, though, that not only are we renewing all of those regional jobs committees for another two years of funding under the new arrangements but also we are adding three new locations to the regional jobs committees. Those three locations are—and I am sure the member for Buderim will be very pleased to hear this—the Sunshine Coast, Central Queensland and Mount Isa. In addition, the existing Gold Coast Regional Jobs Committee will be expanded to include Logan, given the significant crossover of workers and residents from those two regions. These decisions are based on population, employment and economic conditions. Committee members will recall my earlier explanation about the Jobs Queensland projections about where the fastest growing regions are for jobs. Some of those regions I listed already have regional jobs committees and they will find that information from Jobs Queensland very useful. With that Jobs Queensland information and with others, we now believe that those three locations will be best serviced.

For instance, in the 2021 census, around one in five people living in Mount Isa are either not in the labour force, are unemployed or looking for work. We know that the critical minerals sector is going to be going gangbusters in the North West region. It is particularly critical that we are addressing the needs of that region. On the Sunshine Coast, almost a third of the population is not in the workforce, but we are looking at jobs growth there of 12.5 per cent; it is actually the second highest. In Central Queensland, while the unemployment rate fell by 0.8 per cent in the year to June 2023, it remains higher than the state average at 3.7 per cent. We are seeing via the Jobs Queensland projections that there will be an 11.5 per cent increase in the number of jobs going in the Central Queensland region.

As always, we need to prioritise our investment where need is greatest. It is why having good data is absolutely critical. I encourage all members who have regional jobs committee to take an active role in those committees, as I know our government members do. I am sorry, I am not saying the non-government members don't, but I actually do not know. I encourage all members to do that. There has been some great work done by the regional jobs committees. In Mackay, for instance, they are focusing on adaptable skills for emerging industries like pumped hydro, aerospace, new mining and critical minerals. The Cairns Maritime Careers Day—they have worked together to have a workforce plan for the maritime industry which is key. The Springfield RJC has been working with USQ on a partnership application for cyber security training for small businesses. There is important work to be done and I am very pleased to be able to announce those new locations today.

**CHAIR:** Thank you, Minister. That is great news. I know the Redlands Coast Chamber of Commerce will be very pleased.

**Mr SULLIVAN:** Minister, can you update the committee on some of the ways that the government is supporting First Nations businesses across the state?

**Ms FARMER:** I have another couple of announcements. We have been working really closely with First Nations representatives across the business and training sectors. As the member knows, we went to the last election with an \$8.6 million First Nations Training Strategy and have been doing some excellent work in other aspects. Today, I want to announce three things in terms of working with First

Nations businesses and employers and other organisations. One is that we will establish the Queensland Indigenous Business Network which will be Queensland's first representative body, led by First Nations people, to help Indigenous-owned businesses grow and thrive. We know that Indigenous businesses are more likely to employ Indigenous employees. Its acronym is QIBN. I want to thank the working group members—Julie-ann Lambourne, Leann Wilson, Colin Saltmere and Shane Kennelly—who are part of our former business Indigenous reference group. I want to read out these names because the work that has gone into this over a number of years is really critical: Yarrabah Mayor, Ross Andrews; Lockhart Mayor, Wayne Butcher; Kantesha Takai; Karen Seage; Leah Cameron, Leesa Watego; Mundanara Bayles; Noel Niddrie and Steve Noy. I know that there has been significant work undertaken by BIRG members, including those four people who are members of BIRG, to make sure that the proposal that they put to government was actually reflective of the views of First Nations businesses across Queensland.

Personally, this has been a passion project for me. I made a commitment to that group that we would get a representative body, and we have been working closely with them to get the proposal up. The model is looking at self-funding by the end of the four-year period, and we will assist them to achieve that goal.

I also want to announce two initiatives under the First Nations Training Strategy. One of them is the new \$4 million Indigenous Workforce and Skills Development Grant program. There are 10 projects worth \$1.8 million looking at creating training and employment pathways for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and a number of those who will actually support small businesses. I believe, if I ask my Chief of Staff, she may even find me the name of an organisation that is based in the member's electorate who was successful in getting one of those grants. I also just want to announce \$800,000 has been committed to deliver culturally appropriate business mentoring and coaching for Indigenous business owners and operators in the early stages of the business life cycle. We are doing this through the TAFE Queensland One Business program.

Those three are new announcements today. I am so excited about them and so looking forward to that. I also want to give a shout-out to Deadly Business 2032 which I launched in Cairns at the end of last year. It is also an action under the First Nations Training Strategy which is to comprehensively map Indigenous small business support services in the Far North Queensland region. I know there has been particular work done in tourism and thinking about opportunities for First Nations tourism small businesses, particularly in the lead-up to the Olympics. There are some other great initiatives with the Local Government Association. We appointed Indigenous program officers. Our Gateway to Industry Schools program has some focus on supporting First Nations students, so I am very pleased to announce this. It deliberately addresses Closing the Gap outcomes as well.

There is a business in the member's local community that I really wanted to tell him about today, but if I could put that into the next question, I will get back to the member about that. We just cannot seem to put our hands on it at the moment.

**Mr SULLIVAN:** Happy for you to do that. Thank you.

**Ms FARMER:** I know how excited you will be.

**Mr DAMETTO:** Minister, the latest ABS data is indicating that the cost of living is crippling most families at the moment and has indicated that 43 per cent of all small businesses are either not making a profit or the owners of those businesses are actually earning a lot less than their employees. Can the minister outline what the department is doing to try to lower the cost of doing business here in Queensland?

**Ms FARMER:** I thank the member for his question. Yes, it is true. I was referring earlier to the feedback that we receive, which we really rely on, from the small business peak bodies and through our own networks. I also travel extensively across the state. The cost of living is coming up as the No. 1 issue. Either it is small businesses that are struggling to pay their rent because their landlord has increased it due to interest rate increases, or they are paying their own increased interest rates and finding that challenging. If you are a business that relies on discretionary spending, then you are possibly suffering even more than the average business. In fact, I discuss this very often with our Small Business Commissioner, who is here today. If you are a business, say a coffee shop, you are still getting your customers in but they might not be coming five days a week to get a macchiato based on almond milk. They will come in two or three times a week to get a small short black. If you are a newsagent someone might come in to buy the paper, but they are not going to buy the expensive *House & Garden* magazine or the car magazines—I do not know the car magazines, but one of those. They are going to be spending, but they are not going to be spending as much. We know that that is an issue.

We have a range of supports for small businesses not the least of which is a mental wellness package, and I want to go back to that. Our very strongest feedback from Business Chamber Queensland—they do a regular survey—is that in the quarter before last and the one before that mental health was the most significant issue being expressed by small businesses. We worked with Business Chamber Queensland and with the Mental Health Commissioner to develop a business wellness package. The Mental Health Commissioner said to us that we need to make sure that small issues do not become big issues. We have a range of initiatives in that package, which includes a triage process where small businesses can talk to our trained wellness advisers about their issues. That includes whatever problems they are having in their business. They may actually be psychological problems and they can get referred. A lot of the time we are finding that businesses want to talk one on one with an adviser. This is supported by our financial counsellors and financial advisers whom we have funded across the state to work one on one with businesses on how they can manage under the current circumstances. I do not know if the member has ever had much to do with those people. If not, I would be very keen to introduce you to them. It is a fantastic service if you wish to introduce your local businesses to those people. Part of the wellness package is that people can apply for grants to get an external person to then come in.

In terms of advice for small businesses we also offer our Mentoring for Growth service. Again, businesses get one-on-one support on how they can manage their business better. That is on top of the significant other support that we offer small businesses. As the member probably knows, we got permanent funding for our major grants program in last year's budget which includes grants for how to help a business survive and thrive. I say survive because, for some of them, they do not necessarily want to get any bigger; they want to run a business that will earn them a living. Others are about how they can significantly grow and expand to the next level.

We also have a range of other programs including through the Small Business Commissioner. When COVID first started the issue about landlords and leasing disputes was absolutely ferocious because obviously people were hit hard really quickly. We set up the temporary Small Business Commissioner to navigate those disputes.

I am very happy to call up the Queensland Small Business Commissioner if you would like to hear further. I am sure she will not mind my saying that there has been a quite an increase in the number of people seeking help from the Small Business Commissioner's office to actually navigate leases, because that is a cost that is hard for them to avoid. I think they have a 71 per cent success rate in mediating disputes, taking away the need for small businesses to go to QCAT.

Can I just say we have this small business strategy. We have just finished our Big Plans for Small Business strategy. We have a new small business strategy coming up at the end of this year. Our survey was based on feedback from my Queensland Small Business Advisory Council, which is made up of businesses. They are not fancy, highfalutin businesses, the criteria was to be everyday people who are just doing a good day's work in their own business. The DG referred to the frank advice. Can I say it is very frank on what we need to do to support them. Our nine small business peak bodies informed the survey and certainly cost of living has come up as a big issue. It comes up in the Pulse Survey from Business Chamber Queensland. It is an issue that we will address in the coming small business strategy.

I stress to the member if you have individual businesses who are really struggling, that advice is so important. It is all very well we have some great stuff on the Business Queensland website on how to manage your business, particularly in challenging environments, but there is nothing like that one-on-one advice. Of all of the things small businesses ask us for, that one-on-one advice, someone to sit down with them and actually help them work through what is happening with their business, is the No. 1 request we get from small businesses. I am very happy to brief the member on those services so you can refer.

**Mr DAMETTO:** Thank you, Minister. It is good to see that the Small Business Commissioner is getting around. She was in the Hinchinbrook electorate recently. I would have loved to have found out she was going to be in the electorate before she was there, not on Facebook afterwards. Minister, what is the department's interaction with industry or the Small Business Commissioner's interaction with industry like insurance, for example, on trying to bring down the cost of insurance, which is one of the largest costs imposed on small business?

**Ms FARMER:** I am very happy to invite the Queensland Small Business Commissioner to sit at the table and answer your question.



**Ms Lamb:** Thank you, Minister, for the question. As you have pointed out, insurance is something we hear quite a bit about from small business everywhere, particularly in Queensland. At the moment we work collectively with the commissioners in each state as well as the Small Business and Family Enterprise Ombudsman to agitate, particularly the Insurance Council of Australia, in terms of insurance because we know it plays a big role. We also feed in all of the feedback we receive from small business through our assistance team into that group. Two of the members of the commissioner's group actually sit on a committee that feeds directly into a working group federally around insurance. It is something that we continue to hear, it is certainly something we continue to work on and it is across industry. There is lots of advocacy happening at this time.

**Mr MICKELBERG:** Director-general, my question is in relation to the Small Business Financial Counselling Service that the minister just mentioned. I understand federal funding for that program ceased in March. Is that correct?

**Mr Gee:** I will just check that. Rather than waste any time, Chair—I know we have the answer somewhere—could we move on to the next question and come back to that? I have a couple of other quick answers, too.

**CHAIR:** We can certainly come back to that.

**Mr MICKELBERG:** No worries. I will keep going and you can come back to them at the end. Director-general, let's proceed on the basis that federal funding has been cut, because it has and I am sure you will come back and tell me that. Where will funding come from, noting that that federal funding has been cut, in order to ensure the delivery of the Small Business Financial Counselling Service?

**Mr Gee:** The first thing I would say is the Small Business Financial Counselling Program will continue. I will just check the figures. The wellness coaches are funded through to 2024-25 and, of course, we are in the process of developing the new small business strategy based on consultation. Depending on that consultation and the advice I give the minister and then the minister takes to executive government, we will be in a better position to comment.

**Mr MICKELBERG:** To be clear: the wellness coaches and the Small Business Financial Counselling Program are two separate things. The budget says that the state's funding for the Small Business Financial Counselling Program will be exhausted in the next financial year. Who will be responsible for delivering those counselling services for small business when that funding is exhausted?

**Mr Gee:** Sorry, I read from the wrong line. You are exactly right; that \$610,000 will finish 2023-24. It is part of the package we will put forward in the small business strategy. I will give advice to the minister and the minister will take it to executive government. We are looking forward to continuing the good work that has been done by the department in the past, and looking forward to doing it better in the future.

**Mr MICKELBERG:** I have a follow-up to the questions I asked before in relation to red tape reduction. You rattled off a long list of regulatory reform initiatives, if I can call them that, but you did not address my question which was: were any red tape or regulatory requirements removed or reformed as a consequence of the Business Launchpad? If I was to go onto the Business Launchpad 12 months ago and look at the regulatory requirements for a restaurant business, would there be the same number there now as there was then, or has there been an initiative to remove those regulatory requirements?

**Mr Gee:** The whole purpose of the Business Launchpad is actually not to collect ideas around regulatory reform; it is to help businesses understand their obligations. It has been tremendously successful. The whole aim of that program is to allow them to meet their licensing and regulatory requirements. I have already quoted the \$44.7 million in time saving that has been the success of that program to date.

**Mr MICKELBERG:** To be clear: it is not a regulatory reform initiative; it is a timesaving initiative for the 87,000 businesses that have accessed it—is that what we are saying? Because it is often cited as a red tape reduction initiative.

**Mr Gee:** I sure there is information we could glean from that if we ran scripts, but its primary objective is to allow businesses to meet their licensing and regulatory requirements.

**Mr MICKELBERG:** In your previous answer you mentioned that there were seven digital regulatory reforms. What are those seven digital regulatory reforms?

**Mr Gee:** Could you bear with me while we find that answer? I have some answers to your previous questions—we have the numbers.

**CHAIR:** Director-General, it would be great if you could respond to any of those questions you were going to come back to.

**Mr Gee:** In the context of small businesses increasing by over 42,000 in the last two years from 431,000 to 473,000, the number of eligible and undisputed invoices paid late to small businesses was 25,949 for the year-to-date for quarters 1 to 3 in 2022-23. There was a question around the number of respondents. There were 386 respondents to the 'any other comments' question in the small business survey. None, zero, no-one used the term or the words 'crime', 'robbery', 'shoplifting' or 'break-in'.

Of those seven, the department led the Queensland Business Launchpad and the VET-informed consumer project; Queensland Health led the digital food safety hub; the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries led three projects—the biosecurity entity online customer portal which has seen significant improvements, the biosecurity planning app and the digitalisation and modernisation of the agricultural chemical regulatory regime; and the Department of Transport and Main Roads led the permit for access to road and corridor project.

**Mr MICKELBERG:** Director-General, what does the state government consider to be the definition of a small business?

**Mr Gee:** I will turn to my associate director-general to provide that specific definition.

**Mr Koch:** The definition of small business we use for our grant program, for example, is a business that employs up to 19 FTEs.

**Mr MICKELBERG:** Minister, I have a follow-up question based on that answer. Given that the largest single commitment under the \$140 million Big Plans for Small Business Strategy was \$100 million for the Business Investment Fund and that five out of the eight recipients under the Business Investment Fund had greater than 20 employees and did not meet the government's definition of a small business, how does that key plank of the government's small business strategy deliver for small businesses?

**Ms FARMER:** The Business Investment Fund is an initiative under the Treasurer's portfolio and our focus has been on the businesses that have benefited from our major grants programs and a number of the other initiatives that are in the Big Plans for Small Business Strategy. I can give the member some results of those grant programs. The member will have to ask the Treasurer any questions about the Business Investment Fund, but certainly my understanding is that it is for small businesses to enter international markets. However, in terms of the key successes for the Big Plans for Small Business Strategy grant programs, we know that the feedback from people who have been successful with those grants in terms of increasing capability and revenue has been in the 90th percentile. That is a key metric; we are constantly monitoring those programs to make sure that they are relevant to the needs of small businesses. They are targeted in three main areas, and we use our relationships with our peak small business bodies and our Small Business Advisory Council to make sure they are absolutely relevant to their needs.

As the member knows, the other aspects of the Big Plans for Small Business Strategy include the Queensland Business Launchpad. They include the Queensland SME procurement target of 30 per cent. The member will be aware we had a target of 25 per cent, which we surpassed quite quickly, and the target for the end of June is 30 per cent. We will not actually receive the figures on that for some months now because we rely on ABS data; however, we know that already under our procurement policy we have provided government business to the tune of something like \$5.8 billion for small businesses, including around 30 per cent to regional businesses.

I refer to the Small Business Friendly Councils initiative and there are 45 councils currently signed up to the charter. I know this is something that the Queensland Small Business Commissioner has worked very hard on. There was a startup phase under her predecessor and now we are looking at delivering implementation so that we can actually map what is being achieved under that strategy. The feedback from those councils and from small businesses has been outstanding.

We also have our Mentoring for Growth program. We have the activities of the Queensland Small Business Month, which is a significant program to profile small businesses in May. We have launched a business health check and have new and improved online resources. The rating that we get on that new aspect of our website is outstanding and way above our expectations. We have flagged that we will have a new small business strategy by the end of this year. We will be focusing not only on what are the common themes that always come up from small businesses about the sort of support that they

would like, but the member will be aware of the announcement that the Premier, the Minister for Energy and Minister for Public Works and I made a couple of weeks ago about a significant procurement program for the Olympics, as well. We are supporting small businesses in a range of different ways and the initiatives that we put in place are very much in response to the quite significant consultation we undertake on a continual basis with small business.

**Mr O'ROURKE:** Can the minister provide an update on the implementation of the Queensland workforce strategy?

**Ms FARMER:** Would the member mind if I just tell the member for Stafford—if I just say it out loud—the project that has won a grant in the member's electorate? It is Strong Women Talking—Marigurim Mubi Yangu—an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander corporation in the Stafford electorate. That is going to help Indigenous women undertake a customised package and enable them to be facilitators to deliver that package in communities of need, so I know the member will be really proud to know that and I am sure he knows that group really well.

I thank the member for the question about the Queensland workforce strategy. We were the first state in Australia to develop a dedicated workforce strategy, recognising that workforce shortages were one of the top issues facing every employer in every region. It is a 10-year strategy to strengthen Queensland's workforce and it is underpinned by an initial action plan of \$70 million. It includes 33 actions and I would really like to read out some of the highlights. As I said in my introduction, through this program and associated employment programs which now come under the workforce strategy we estimate that we have assisted almost 45,000 employees and jobseekers into jobs just through our range of programs in this year alone.

Of course I must refer to the Diverse Queensland Workforce program. After having a pilot, I was so pleased to launch the new investment in that in the member's electorate I think it was at the end of last year with Multicultural Australia. This is a program which fits under the category I mentioned before to the member for Hinchinbrook about how employers identify those people who normally face workforce barriers in their communities and then how they support them to be productive employees in their workforce. We know that the success rate for Diverse Queensland Workforce is something like 86 per cent. It is incredibly successful working with migrants and refugees and we have that in various locations across the state. In the member's area there is a humanitarian settlement centre where there are 4,000 migrants and refugees and we need to be able to upscale that program. If 85 per cent of the people just in Rockhampton alone could be supported through that program, then the impact on the local workforce would be significant, and obviously we had those conversations with local employers and the Queensland Chamber of Commerce.

We also have our Workforce Connect Fund which was a commitment of \$20 million which I referred to earlier. Sixteen large-scale projects have been supported under that first round, benefiting almost 4½ thousand employers and supporting more than 20,000 Queensland workers to either find or stay in those jobs. We have \$3 million allocated to the Local Government Association of Queensland to extend its Indigenous capacity building program, and that has a 95 per cent success rate for First Nations people going into employment. We know that under our fee-free TAFE we have supported 37,000 people to undertake fee-free TAFE. We have a new microcredentials program which builds on a pilot that we had where microcredentials are provided for businesses and employees, so in the tourism sector alone 400 businesses and 1,300 employers were supported to have that program so they could take people who do not normally have skills in that area into their businesses.

We have the Gateway to Industry Schools program which now supports over 34,000 people. Under our Skilling Queenslanders for Work program—and I know this is a particular passion of the member for Stafford as well as all members—50,000 participants have secured work through that strategy. I just announced on the weekend opening round 2 and we will have supported 15,000 people through that program. The Queensland workforce strategy is unique in Australia. We have had to devise absolutely never been done before programs to address what are extraordinary circumstances and I really want to commend my department but also the industry and community leaders who form my workforce round table where we look at the implementation of that workforce strategy and also responding to the very rapidly evolving workforce environment.

**CHAIR:** I have a Skilling Queenslanders for Work graduation to go to tomorrow. It is a fantastic program.

**Ms FARMER:** I know; they are beautiful.

**CHAIR:** Yes, they are. Given that it is 5.15, I just might confirm with the DG: was there anything else to come back on with regard to the Cleveland Youth Detention Centre and whether it is even possible for you to determine that breakdown? I think that was the only outstanding one.

**Ms FARMER:** I will defer to the DG.

**Mr Gee:** The first point I would make is that, in terms of our records, we might need to do a detailed search. We individually case manage any young person that leaves detention obviously, and there are significant holdings there. My first bit of advice is that that might be a script that we will need to write in a manual search. The true holder of the information is the Department of Education. I will leave it to the minister to see whether we can take that on notice or not. Frankly, we want to provide the information; I just do not hold the data and I just do not know how much it would take the Department of Education to find that, but I would repeat very clearly that we follow very strong case management principles in that space.

**CHAIR:** Then perhaps that is something that can be taken back to the House instead of here?

**Ms FARMER:** Yes, if that is okay with the member.

**Mr MICKELBERG:** To be clear, the guidance is that it should be directed at the Minister for Education; is that correct?

**Mr Gee:** They have the actual records, but we would want to work with them. We have individual case management records as well that we could search, but that might take us a good amount of time. I just need to go back and understand the system.

**Mr MICKELBERG:** I guess inevitably what happens is I put a question to the Minister for Education and she will say that it is the responsibility of Minister Farmer and vice versa, so I guess I just want an assurance that if we do go down that process we are actually going to get an answer.

**Ms FARMER:** Yes. Without taking up too much time from the committee, the young people who exit the youth detention centres have case management and so there are a range of ways in which they will be monitored, so the youth justice person might in fact be managing them for mental health programs or they might be supporting them to do a TAFE course. So they will have a certain amount of data in terms of the actual course and then that will be Education, so it is just not a clean line of information, but I commit to doing our best in providing an answer.

**Mr MICKELBERG:** Just to wrap it up, is it possible for the department to take it on notice and I accept that if you are unable to provide that information that is an answer in and of itself?

**Ms FARMER:** We absolutely commit to providing you with the best possible answer. I think the deadline for getting back is Monday or something. I do not know if we can get back by Monday.

**CHAIR:** Okay, but you will let us know one way or the other?

**Ms FARMER:** I absolutely commit to getting back with a response.

**CHAIR:** Excellent. Thank you very much. The committee will now adjourn for a break and the hearing will resume at 5.30 to examine the expenditure in youth justice.

**Proceedings suspended from 5.18 pm to 5.31 pm.**



**CHAIR:** The committee will now examining the estimates for the youth justice portfolio area until 6.45. I welcome back to the table the member for Clayfield and I welcome the member for Currumbin. Over to you, member for Clayfield.

**Mr NICHOLLS:** Minister, since 2015 unlawful use of a motor vehicle has increased 106 per cent, unlawful entry 59 per cent and robbery up 120 per cent according to the Queensland Police crime statistics website, and according to the Queensland statistician child offenders are responsible for half of these. Minister, do you accept we have a youth crime crisis?

**Ms FARMER:** Clearly, addressing youth crime is a priority for the Palaszczuk Labor government. It is why we have adopted a range of strategies to address youth crime. As the member is aware, there is no one single solution to youth crime. My priorities, as the youth justice minister, are community safety, they are targeting serious repeat offenders and addressing the complex causes of crime. We know over the last 10 years there has been a 37 per cent—I am just going to ask my chief of staff for the particular brief that I am after.

**Mr NICHOLLS:** I would have thought you would have had it at your fingertips, Minister.

**Ms FARMER:** I do, but I need to make sure I am getting the figures right. We know that over the last 10 years there has been a 34 per cent decline in youth crime over that period and, thanks to the

actions we put in place, 30 per cent of that decline has occurred over the last five years, but it remains that 20 per cent of young offenders are committing 54 per cent of the crime, which is why we are really targeting that group.

Community safety is absolutely at the forefront of everything that we do in youth justice. Earlier this year we introduced the Strengthening Community Safety Act where we introduced some of the harshest laws in the country. I thank the opposition for supporting those laws. It is very early days to see the long-term impacts of those laws, but I just want to read out some of the figures we have already on those new offences that were introduced. We introduced penalties for the unlawful use of a motor vehicle, we introduced a new circumstance of aggravation for unlawful use of a motor vehicle, including offending at night, boasting on social media, using or threatening to use violence, is or pretends to be armed. We have seen 45 distinct young people, for example, charged with using social media as a circumstance of aggravation. We have made breach of bail condition an offence for a young person as it is for adults and we have seen 402 unique young offenders charged with a total of 1,681 charges of breach of bail as at 20 July 2023. We expanded and extended the electronic monitoring device trial and an expansion of presumption against bail. The courts are now able to declare a serious repeat offender and consider that in sentencing. There have been 18 of those declarations. We have made changes to conditional release orders, extending the maximum duration of the order from three to six months, and there have been 22 of those.

We now see more people in detention in Queensland than any other state or territory in Australia other than the Northern Territory. We have announced that we will build two new detention centres, one at Woodford and one in Cairns. Building on the model that we have used at West Moreton, those two will be therapeutic models because although the detention centres are there to have young offenders suffer the consequences of their offences and keep the community safe, we also want to break that cycle of youth crime. We do not want to see them back in the system again, which is why those detention centres will be therapeutic.

That leads me to one of the other key elements of the strategy, which is about early intervention and prevention. We have committed over \$464 million over five years to addressing those complex causes of youth crime. We know that a typical serious repeat offender has been exposed to one or more of the following: DV, mental health issues, substance abuse, neglect, homelessness, poverty, disengagement from education. Turning around that cycle when a young person has actually experienced that level of disadvantage for 12, 14, 16 years is not a small thing. However, I am very pleased to see that we are already getting some excellent results from some of those programs that are specifically targeting serious repeat offenders. Intensive case management, for instance, which is in its early days, sees a youth worker work with a serious repeat offender, sometimes every day for five or six days a week—it can take nine to 12 months to turn that person around working with their family and identifying other younger siblings. We are already seeing a 51 per cent reduction in the frequency of offending and a 72 per cent reduction in the proportion of crimes against the person. Our youth co-responder teams, and I have just announced the 13th of those across the state, are aimed at keeping serious repeat offenders from offending. There is a 95 per cent compliance rate.

We have a range of other programs that are in place and we know the Auditor-General has announced an evaluation of those programs. My director-general will be also evaluating those programs. I have said publicly on a number of occasions that if we find that any of those programs are not working then we will stop doing them. Can I also say that we are very conscious of the victims of crime and of victims receiving support. The Premier asked the parliamentary committee to travel around Queensland and make recommendations about the impact on victims and what support we can provide, and I believe we will see a response to those recommendations in due course. I will talk about some of the work we are doing in that space a little bit later.

**Mr NICHOLLS:** But not in the answer to this question hopefully. Thank you, Minister, for that very lengthy answer covering so many areas.

**Ms FARMER:** Pleasure.

**Mr NICHOLLS:** Can I then go back to something you said early on in relation to the plans and say in 2016 there was a five-point youth crime plan, in 2019 there was another four-point plan, in 2020 there was another five-point action plan, in 2021 there was a media release and a strong plan, and in late 2022 we had the 10-point plan that became the 11-point plan when breach of bail was adopted. Despite all these announcements and plans, serious repeat offenders have increased by 70 per cent according to the most recent Childrens Court annual report. Minister, having listened to everything that you said in the last answer and all the programs and having outlined all of those plans over the last six

years, why have they all failed and serious repeat offenders continue to go up from 10 per cent to 17 per cent and I think in your answer you mentioned now 20 per cent?

**Ms FARMER:** I am sorry: can I clarify what the question was?

**Mr NICHOLLS:** Why have all the government's plans failed given the number of serious repeat offenders has increased from 10 per cent by a 70 per cent increase to 17 per cent according to the latest Childrens Court numbers?

**Ms FARMER:** I will ask the director-general to verify those figures. However, I will say that there are actually now fewer young people in the youth justice system. There has been a 34 per cent decline in the last 10 years and a 30 per cent decline in the last five years. In fact, 42 per cent of young people now who enter the youth justice system do not return.

What we are seeing is a small number of serious repeat offenders. The numbers of offences that they are committing is actually greater. That is why we have put a range of strategies in place. There is no one strategy that is going to address this issue. These people have lived lives for 12, 14, 16 years exposed to a range of different issues and we are not going to turn those people around quickly. If they are a risk to the community, we have introduced laws that make sure the community is safe from them and they are placed in detention. The work we are doing is about stopping them from re-entering the system and preventing further young people from getting into the system. That is why everything we do, every decision we make, will be based on the evidence of whether that program works or not.

**Mr NICHOLLS:** Indeed. I appreciate that. With respect, Minister, it still does not answer the question as to why there has been an increase in serious repeat offenders as reported by the Childrens Court annual reports. Minister, the Atkinson review into the 2021 reforms, which the government sat on for at least five months, records an increase in the Serious Repeat Offender Index from 369 in 2018 to 461 in 2021. Bearing in mind your comments about looking for evidence, the evidence that I relayed previously regarding the increase in the number of serious repeat offenders in the Childrens Court report and the evidence of the increase in serious repeat offenders in the Atkinson review, do you accept that this is more evidence that the government's reforms are not working and that Queenslanders are paying the price for the youth justice crisis?

**Ms FARMER:** What the member will find is that this trend in serious repeat offenders is a national trend. Anecdotally, every serious repeat offender now—

**Mr NICHOLLS:** That is not evidence, Minister, is it?

**Ms FARMER:** If the member could let me finish—every single serious repeat offender now has an addiction to substance of some kind. What we are seeing, and these are direct figures, is that there are more—

**Mr NICHOLLS:** I am sorry, Minister: every single young offender has an addiction, did you say?

**CHAIR:** Member for Clayfield—

**Mr NICHOLLS:** I am sorry. I am asking for clarification.

**CHAIR:** That is across the table. The minister is being responsive to the question. Minister, please continue.

**Ms FARMER:** Anecdotally, given the complex issues that serious repeat offenders are exhibiting, they are harder to turn around. What is indisputable is that there are more young people in detention now. While we are seeing those numbers go up, in Queensland there are more young people in detention than in any other state or territory in Australia other than the Northern Territory. We are approaching this in a range of different ways. Our laws are keeping the community safe by making sure that those young people are placed in detention. The strategies that we have in place are about trying to ensure that those people do not re-enter the system or that we are addressing the long-term complex needs of those people so that we can stop them either entering or coming back into the system in the first place. Those diversionary programs are a long game. A serious repeat offender is not going to be turned around in two weeks by a nice little program. They are systemic issues that need to be addressed and we have a range of programs to do that.

**Mr NICHOLLS:** Minister, four years ago at estimates you said—

... if we do not address the causes of offending and reoffending then all we will be able to promise Queenslanders is that we will build more and more detention centres now and into the future and we will never break the cycle.

Minister, given that the number of serious repeat offenders turning up at the Childrens Court has increased according to that report by 70 per cent, given the increase identified in the Atkinson review

in 2021 and given that we are now going to be spending money on two new detention centres that have been announced but not yet funded, has this government failed Queenslanders when it comes to addressing the youth crime crisis in Queensland?

**CHAIR:** Before you commence, Minister: member you are treading into territory of inferences within that question. I will allow the minister some latitude in responding but I ask you to consider that in questions put going forward.

**Ms FARMER:** Community safety comes first. If a young person is posing a risk to the community then they will be placed in detention and we make no apology for that. The rate of youth crime has decreased, as I have said, by 30 per cent in the last five years. We are uncompromising in our very strong laws—and I thank again the LNP for supporting those laws—that if a young person poses a risk to the community they will be detained and that is why they are being detained.

**Mr NICHOLLS:** Minister, in 2019, to deal with your then watch-house crisis, you introduced legislation to make it easier for young offenders to get bail. Following two tragedies, the government has belatedly backtracked and even gone so far as to adopt the LNP's breach of bail policy. Minister, can you reassure the community that you will not repeat your 2019 mistake that had to be reversed two years later?

**Ms FARMER:** I need to refute and I cannot remember the exact wording but I think it was that we had adopted the LNP's breach of bail laws. Clearly, the LNP did not actually have breach of bail laws. In fact, they were laws that pretty much shackled the judiciary because they were not able to be used effectively. We have seen in the breach of bail laws that we have—

**Mr NICHOLLS:** So you unshackled the judiciary, Minister?

**Ms FARMER:** We have seen in the breach of bail laws that we introduced—

**CHAIR:** Please hold for a moment, Minister. I ask you to be respectful at this table and contribute in a manner that we would expect young people to contribute in.

**Ms FARMER:** Under our breach of bail laws, we have seen 402 unique young offenders charged with a total of 1,681 charges of breach of bail. I would say that those figures, under anyone's terms, would be successful. If it is okay, Chair, I will refer for further comment on that to the director-general.

**Mr Gee:** I am very mindful of the impact of one crime on any victim, having worked in the system for well over 37 years. I am very respectful of the role of the judiciary, its independence and also the independence of the Police Service and its prosecution system. My job as I see it is to provide facts to the committee. The minister mentioned bail and the likelihood of bail being granted at a court appearance over time.

The figures I have in front of me are clear. In 2012-13 and in 2014, the rate of bail provided by the courts in court decisions to young people was 60 and 61 per cent. Since that time, in particular since 2015-16, that number has reduced to 57 per cent. Over the 10-year period, the number of young people appearing before a court who were given bail—they have not been found guilty of an offence of course—was 60 and 61 per cent. There is a clear downward trend for the courts to not provide bail as often. That has reduced to 57 per cent. I hope that helps the committee.

**Mr NICHOLLS:** Minister, you mentioned this in one of your answers. Since the expanded trial of electronic monitoring devices, how many have been issued in each of Cairns, Mount Isa and Toowoomba, being the expanded areas for it, and how many 15-year-olds have been fitted with these devices as a condition of bail?

**Ms FARMER:** I believe I can give you the overall number, but I may need to refer to the director-general for further detail. In fact, I might just refer to the director-general for that detail.

**Mr Gee:** To my best advice, as of 2 August, there have been two 15-year-olds fitted with an EMD. I just want to check the locations I have in front of me. Is it okay if I provide that before the end of session?

**CHAIR:** Certainly.

**Mrs GERBER:** Were those two in Cairns, Mount Isa or Toowoomba?

**Ms FARMER:** Chair, can I just clarify which member is asking the questions?

**CHAIR:** I just asked the member for Clayfield.

**Ms FARMER:** I am just not sure if the member for Currumbin was asking questions.

**CHAIR:** No, I was waiting for the member for Clayfield to respond.

**Mr NICHOLLS:** That is perfectly fine. Just to clarify, Director-General, you say two 15-year-olds. You were going to come back to us with the number, irrespective of age, in each of Cairns, Mount Isa and Toowoomba? I want to make sure that the answer reflected the question or the question was clear enough for you?

**Mr Gee:** Definitely. As of 2 August there have been no grants of bail with an EMD condition across any of the new trial sites—Toowoomba, Cairns and Mount Isa.

**Mr NICHOLLS:** Thank you. Minister, Queenslanders fear they will face increasing insurance premiums due to the increase in crime. They are literally paying the price for the increase in crime and you are responsible for some of the legislation that many people would say has been watered down. Do you accept responsibility for the insurance cost-of-living crisis that Queenslanders face today?

**Ms FARMER:** Can I ask the member to elaborate on that question? I am not clear what he is actually referring to.

**Mr NICHOLLS:** Youth crime—stealing cars—leads to increases in insurance. Many people are paying increased insurance premiums as a result of increases in crime in their areas. The legislation this government has put in place, including in the minister's term previously as the youth justice minister, many people believe is watered down. Do you accept any responsibility for the cost-of-living crisis by the increase in insurance premiums; yes or no?

**CHAIR:** Minister, I will give you some latitude in your response, understanding that insurance premiums increase across the board for a number of reasons—from natural disasters through to a whole range of things—and given that, absolutely as the minister for Clayfield points out—

**Mr NICHOLLS:** The minister could answer the question, Chair, rather than the chair answering the question.

**CHAIR:** I am not answering the question; I am giving the minister latitude and clarifying why I am giving her that latitude.

**Mr NICHOLLS:** It is what we call in court 'leading'.

**Ms FARMER:** Sorry, I did not catch whether the member was adding to the question?

**CHAIR:** No.

**Ms FARMER:** I will make a few comments. Firstly, the member refers to 'watered down' laws. I know it is a slogan from the LNP, but in fact we have some of the harshest laws in this country, and the LNP supported them. We have more young people in detention than any other state or territory in the country, aside from the Northern Territory. I make that statement to refute the imputations that were in the member's question. Secondly, the chair is absolutely right that increased insurance premiums are related to a range of variables, including the weather. Queensland is the most disaster-prone state in Australia. Chair, I wonder if I could possibly provide my answer without commentary from the other members of the committee, please?

**CHAIR:** I remind everybody at this table, as I have stated at the start of this session and the start of this morning's session, that I expect everyone to conduct themselves in a manner which is respectful. I reiterate that it should be a manner of behaviour that we would expect any young person watching to see.

**Ms FARMER:** I thank the chair for her guidance. The other point that I make is that the Premier acknowledged the impact on victims not just of youth crime but of crime in general, which is why she asked a parliamentary committee to travel around Queensland and investigate the impact on victims of crime. There has been a range of recommendations made to the parliament. I believe that report was tabled about six weeks ago. It is the Attorney-General's responsibility to respond to that report. It made a range of recommendations. We will wait to see how the government responds to those. The Premier made it very clear, including with the announcement of a victim's commission, that the impact on victims of crime was something she considered to be a priority.

**Mr SULLIVAN:** Can the minister provide an update to the committee on the work being done with and for victims of youth crime?

**Ms FARMER:** I state again that community safety is absolutely at the forefront of everything we are doing in youth justice. We have seen those figures—and I have quoted them several times already today—that the number of youth offenders has decreased by 34 per cent over the past 10 years and 30 per cent in the past five years. We know we are still working with a hardcore group of serious repeat offenders—20 per cent committing 54 per cent of the crime. We know that we have programs in place that are showing good results. I spoke before about intensive case management where there is a 51 per



cent reduction in frequency of offending and a 72 per cent reduction in offences against the person. The youth co-responder team has a 95 per cent compliance rate. We have actually seen around 66,000 young people in those locations across the state. We have a range of other programs which we are evaluating on a rolling basis. We are evaluating every single one of those. I am always conscious when I talk about those statistics that, if you are a victim of crime, if you are a person who has had someone break into your house, if you are a person who has lost a loved one, you are really traumatised. Although we are seeing those good figures coming through, that is probably of little solace to you if you have had that experience.

Putting victims' voices at the heart of the youth justice programs that we offer and the policies we make is really critical to the success of these programs, which is why today I am very pleased to announce that I will be appointing a victim representative to my Youth Justice Reference Group, and it will be Mr Ken Cunliffe from the Voice of Victims, Toowoomba Advocacy organisation.

Chair, I am just finding it really distracting because there is an ongoing commentary. I am trying to be respectful in my answers. I just wonder if we could have that amongst committee members, please.

**Mr LISTER:** I am close to it and it was not affecting me.

**CHAIR:** I could hear it that time, member for Southern Downs. We were pretty generous with time in the last session and allowed you to ask those questions, so if we could have that courtesy across the table.

**Ms FARMER:** The addition of a victim representative is going to be a really valuable thing for me, and I really want to thank Ken Cunliffe for agreeing to be on the group. The membership of the Youth Justice Reference Group, which is chaired by my director-general, is made up of stakeholders from a range of organisations. It has been very valuable in the past. I met with them very soon after I was reappointed as youth justice minister. They are a group that provides very frank advice, and they will assist me in the development of a new youth justice strategy but also oversee the implementation of the reforms that we currently have in place.

I know that Ken has already played a really constructive role. He established the Voice of Victims, Toowoomba Advocacy group after his car was stolen. I have met with Ken and members of his group. He was a driving force behind the forum in Toowoomba, which was held in February of this year. He has been very constructive and helpful and very frank in terms of the actions he thinks the government should take. I feel certain that he will very ably represent the voice of victims. He will be an important part of the advice that my director-general and I will take in terms of making sure that victims' voices are heard in the programs going forward.

We know that there is other assistance already for victims, including: \$30 million to assist seniors secure their homes; \$9 million to respond better to victims of property crime, including \$3 million for counselling; \$64 million for policing responses; \$15 million for community-based crime action committees and community partnership innovation grants; and \$10 million for the vehicle immobiliser trial in Townsville, Toowoomba and Mount Isa. As I have said, I look forward to seeing our response to the recommendations from the inquiry into the support provided to victims of crime.

**Mr SULLIVAN:** Thank you for that comprehensive response, Minister. Can the minister provide an update on what the government is doing to address the serious repeat offending that you touched on earlier in some of your responses?

**Ms FARMER:** As I have said before, although the number of young offenders has decreased by 34 per cent in the last 10 years, what we have seen is the remaining cohort where 20 per cent are committing 54 per cent of the crime. It is part of my focus to target serious repeat offenders. That means keeping the community safe, which means we have some of the strongest laws in the country. I read out before some of the numbers around some of the charges we have already seen, even though it was only introduced several months ago.

Those new laws are aimed specifically at addressing serious repeat offenders. We have seen that we are detaining more of those young people. We have more young people in detention than any other state or territory in Australia, and we have announced that we are building new detention centres. We are unapologetic about keeping the community safe, and we will detain those young people if they commit offences. They should not be a risk to the community. We do not want to see those young people return to the system, which is why the two new detention centres we have announced in Woodford and Cairns will be therapeutic centres. As the member may know, the Cairns facility will be 40 beds and Woodford will be 80 beds. Our initial engagement with elders in Woodford has begun and

we are still considering the Cairns sites. We expect to open both of the new centres in 2026. That will be mean a total of 426 beds in total in youth detention centres across the state.

The new and amended legislation has been in place for a couple of months now, and we are seeing significant numbers of young people charged with those offences. The most significant is the breach of bail offence, which has seen 402 unique young offenders charged with a total of 1,681 charges of breaching bail. What remains is that we must stop the pipeline of serious repeat offenders, and if they are in the system already we do not want to see them back again. That is why they are therapeutic detention centres why there are intensive programs to address what are significantly entrenched behaviours. Intensive case management is something which is very promising but, as the member would be aware, it takes a really long time. It can take nine to 12 months before we see a turnaround. What is also significant is that we are working with their families, which means that their siblings will be less likely to come into the system. That is the aim. It is the same with our youth co-responder initiative. We literally have teams of youth justice workers and police on 24/7 shifts in most locations. They literally go to the places where they know those young offenders will be congregating and they are literally stopping them from offending. What is then happening is that they are monitoring those young people, and they are often then looking at their siblings and keeping an eye on them so they are stopping them from coming into the system as well.

We know that every serious repeat offender will have a profile that includes disengagement from education, the use of ice or other methamphetamines, parents who have been held in adult custody, having experienced or been impacted by domestic violence, or disability or mental health disorders. These are not issues that can be turned around easily. Even the announcement by the Premier and the Minister for Education of free kindy will be a game changer, because we know the single greatest indicator of a person becoming a young offender is disengagement from education by the age of seven. The fact that now every child will be able to start school not way behind the others in terms of their emotional or educational milestones means there is a chance they will not become disengaged with education. Just that in itself, let alone a number of the other initiatives like the 2,000 days and a number of the other health, education and other related initiatives, is going to stop that pipeline.

**Mr O'ROURKE:** My question is to the minister. Will the minister update the committee on any progress of your commitment to evaluate all youth justice programs?

**Ms FARMER:** This is absolutely critical. We have made a commitment to the community that everything we do will be based on evidence. We use evidence-based evaluations to determine the best programs that we can deliver both across our youth detention centres and across youth justice services. The Auditor-General has announced that he will be evaluating all youth justice programs, and we welcome that announcement from the Auditor-General. My director-general will also be evaluating youth justice programs, and he will provide the results of those evaluations to the Auditor-General. In fact, he has already met with the Auditor-General to discuss that with him. Chair, \$10 million has been allocated to those evaluations, and it will be a rolling suite of evaluations.

Some of our programs have only been going for a short period of time and need to reach that level of maturation. Some of them have been going for quite a long period of time. For example, our next program to be evaluated is the 72-hour release plan that is currently being evaluated internally. The member may know that is that intensive care and case management offered to a young person when they first leave the youth detention centre to guarantee they are set up as successfully as possible to re-enter life. I very much look forward to seeing the results of those evaluations. I have been asked many times what the evaluation is going to be about and what we are going to do with the results. I have made it very clear that, if any of our programs are shown to be not working, we will actually stop those programs.

**Mr DAMETTO:** Minister, with reference to the SDS, will the minister advise if there is any estimated cost for the construction of the proposed new detention centre at Edmonton?

**Ms FARMER:** We have not made the announcement about the site in Cairns, but there is money allocated in this year's budget for the two new detention centres. In relation to the expenditure for the 80-bed youth detention centre at Wacol, for instance, we cannot give you the exact cost because that is subject to negotiation with potential contractors, and some of the design work and initial work around the detention centre. If I can reiterate, there has been no site identified for Cairns. If the member is okay and through the chair, I might ask the director-general to provide a bit more detail about that.

**Mr DAMETTO:** Thank you, Minister.

**Mr Gee:** There is approximately \$13 million in the forwards for planning purposes. The minister is correct. The reference is, from memory, page 181 of Budget Paper No. 4 around the commercial

negotiations. Of course we will move out to tender. A business case was in the budget for 2021-22 and in the forwards there is approximately \$13 million for a range of planning processes as we deliver. The minister is also correct that we have not made a final decision. I have not given her advice around final exact locations in Cairns, but I intend to do that as soon as I have more information with respect to a validation report and a few other things like that.

**Mr DAMETTO:** I have a quick follow-up question. Can the minister advise what the estimated operating cost of the new detention centre will be, given its size and its therapeutic services that will be available to those 35 to 40 people staying at the detention centre? Has that been quantified in the business case, compared to Cleveland Youth Detention Centre, for example, which is about \$2,000 a day per child?

**Ms FARMER:** If the member is okay and through you, Chair, I will refer to the director-general.

**Mr DAMETTO:** Thank you.

**CHAIR:** Thank you.

**Mr Gee:** The RoGS data is very clear. It takes a considerable amount of time to break down the costs. I noticed the question on notice and the response we gave in the process. Frankly, the infrastructure, the footprint and the size of a detention centre have a significant impact on the operating costs, not just the capital costs—the smaller the centre, less economies of scale, more staff required. We are still in the process though and we are very open to co-design. We have a range of key stakeholders we have worked with in the past and we have invited through the youth reference group, as well as anyone who wants to provide input as we have travelled across the state.

I cannot give the business case in detail because it was a matter that went to executive government and the CBRC. Recently, there has been a significant amount of literature republished from when I was in this position a few years ago. It is very clear that Spain and a few other places lead the way in this space. What they have done is move towards the therapeutic approach that the government has adopted on advice. It is not just the physical space that is important; it is the services and the quality of the rehabilitation services. Frankly, that means that the operating cost is likely to increase in the short term because we need more and more degree qualified clinical people in the detention centres. There has been huge improvement over the last four or five years in that space. As an example, when young people are separated to their rooms, I know as a matter of course a health professional nurse and a psychologist attend and talk to that person and try to treat them. There has been significant improvement. I hope that helps. We are still in the process of developing the final operating cost.

**Mr BERKMAN:** Recent reporting has shown the extensive use of periods of separation and night mode lockdowns in Queensland's youth detention centres. I understand from that reporting that separation data does not necessarily reflect the time a child has actually spent locked in their cell but the period during which they are formally under that designation. I think my question is most appropriately to the minister. What data does the department have on the actual amount of time where children are locked in their cells, including cumulative periods across a child's sentence and broader figures across the state? How is that data collated and reviewed?

**Ms FARMER:** If you had asked me about the number of separations, I would have been able to give you that answer. For that level of detail, if the member is okay and through the chair I will refer to my director-general.

**Mr BERKMAN:** Absolutely, and I would welcome the information on separation numbers as well.

**Mr Gee:** I have recently just come back to the role. I know the Queensland Ombudsman has been doing work since late 2022. He provided an initial report to the department. There were policy changes. One of the recommendations he made was to upgrade the ICT system. Largely, we have been using manual-based approaches to record, and that has a significant impact on our ability to draw information down. I met with the Queensland Ombudsman. I spoke to him a number of times over the last few weeks. I met with him on Monday with the senior executive director of youth detention services. I had cause to change the policy and tighten it last week after having talked to the Ombudsman. I advised him that I had made an independent decision to tighten that policy and to make sure that we are in a space, no matter whether it was manual recording or moving towards an ICT solution, where we were better equipped. We have spent a significant amount of time, effort and money well spent in the last few months, I am advised, so that we should in the next few months have a much better ICT system. We need that for transparency and accountability. I would add though that the government has invested a significant amount of money in terms of body worn cameras, CCTV footage and the like, and services to those young people.

The number of incidents I think is about 4,170-odd over the 12-month period. To be really frank, a quarter of them have been as a result of staff absences so we have worked really hard in that space. I would welcome all of the committee to help us get the word out that youth justice is a great place to work. We are really keen on recruiting. At this stage from memory we have fewer than 12 FTE vacancies, which is a significant improvement on where we were three to four months ago.

**Mr NICHOLLS:** Minister, in your opening statement and subsequently, you indicated that the director-general is conducting a review of programs. If I understand correctly, in your most recent commentary you said that the director-general would be providing information to the Auditor-General, who independently of anything else the government is doing decided to carry out an investigation as well. Minister, can you advise the number of programs that are to be reviewed? Have these programs been reviewed since 2016? Do you know when the review will be completed? Can you confirm you will promptly table the director-general's report in the parliament?

**Ms FARMER:** Every program will be reviewed and it will be, as I answered a previous question—and I will refer to the director-general in a moment to provide more detail—it will be a rolling program of reviews. Some of the programs have not yet reached the level of maturity in order to be evaluated effectively, so we need to give them time. I understand, for instance, that there are some programs that have been running at the youth detention centres which will be replaced with what are considered more effective programs. That is our commitment, that everything we do will be based on evidence. I will refer, if that is alright with the member and the chair, to refer to the DG for further detail.

**Mr Gee:** Member, I am very conscious of your time. While I have the microphone, those two 15-year-olds were in the Logan area, Mr Nicholls. Transition 2 Success, a really strong program, was evaluated in November 2018. To my knowledge, that report is out there. It showed a 67 per cent success rate in terms of young people not reoffending, but internal data review recently shows 54 per cent of young people completing a course did not reoffend. Simply put, it is getting more difficult because we are focusing on those very serious repeat offenders.

The restorative justice conferencing program—the international literature is very clear, but there was an internal review in May 2018, an external review whilst I was the director-general in May 2020 conducted by KPMG, and then supervised community accommodation, of course, was evaluated and the program ceased. The conditional bail program was evaluated in March 2020 externally by the Nous Group. Family-led decision-making was evaluated in May 2020 externally. Adolescent sexual offending services was evaluated in June 2020 externally by Swinburne University. Those three that I have just mentioned are on the list for us to do rolling evaluations of.

The legal advocacy and bail support program which was introduced was evaluated in November 2021, externally by Nous, and it showed a 32 per cent reduction in reoffending. The youth justice strategy implementation evaluation was conducted in March 2022 externally by KPMG. Of course, all of this has been provided to the Auditor-General. I recognise his independence and thank him for the work his team is doing. The youth offending support service was internally reviewed in April 2022, but we will move to review that very shortly.

The Indigenous Youth and Family Worker program has been reviewed internally, but I am sure it is on the list for the Auditor-General's team to have a good look at.

Integrated case management, which was started in early 2020, late 2019, a wonderful initiative, was evaluated internally. Then the external review in November 2022 by Nous Group showed that the science is clear in that space—72 per cent reduction in offending for very serious offenders, and a 51 per cent reduction in offending frequency.

The intensive bail initiative was reviewed internally in October 2022, but I have asked that to be looked at as well by the Auditor-General. Of course, that will be a matter for him and his team. Electronic monitoring was looked at by the former commissioner, Bob Atkinson, AC. Multi-agency collaborative panels have been reviewed internally, but that will be a specific focus of our work. The Mount Isa Transitional Hub will also be examined. Youth justice reform generally—you have already referred to it Mr Nicholls—was the subject of former commissioner Atkinson's work. Navigate Your Health is run by Children's Health Queensland, but that will be a matter for them, but that is a program we are clearly focused on. The Townsville Community Youth Response program was evaluated internally in 2019, but that has been subjected to external review again by the Nous Group. I expect that report to be with us within a number of weeks as a first initial draft. I am hoping to be able to provide that to the Auditor-General. I could go on, but they are the main programs. We will look at the 72-hour release program.

There has been an external review of the On Country program. The former department received that, I understand, in late March, early April. I have examined it. It is largely qualitative with some quantitative work and I wish to discuss that with the Queensland Audit Office. We will be doing further work in that space. I am looking for significant improvement in that program, but I must say that, particularly in Cairns, the community controlled organisation that is delivering that is doing a great job.

The youth co-responder program has been expanded and we expect an external review. There was an internal review undertaken, as I understand it, but an external review will be with us in the not-too-distant future. However, it will be in a couple of phases. The Queensland Audit Office will also be looked at. They are the major parts of the work.

**Mr NICHOLLS:** Thank you, Director-General, for that very comprehensive report there, and for carrying on even after you were saying you were conscious of my time. I appreciate that as well. Obviously enthusiasm has taken over. Can you confirm, so that I am clear on it, those are all reports or reviews that have occurred, and you have gone through it all. The minister has said that you will carry out a review of programs. Will you provide a final report, either to the minister or to the Auditor-General? Minister, will you be tabling your director-general's report, similar to, for example, the material that the DG has just provided or read out?

**CHAIR:** Member for Clayfield, let's do that as the first question to the director-general and we will come back for the question to the minister.

**Mr NICHOLLS:** Sure.

**Mr Gee:** Very firm advice will be provided to the minister from me around the outcomes of those evaluations. It is a matter for the Auditor-General as to when he will table his report.

**Mr NICHOLLS:** Minister, you will receive obviously very firm advice from your director-general who will provide advice to the Auditor-General. Of course the Auditor-General will table his report, but will the director-general's report to you be tabled or provided, and will the outcomes of the director-general's review be provided to the parliament?

**Ms FARMER:** As the member will have gleaned from that quite comprehensive response from the DG, there is going to be a rolling set of evaluations because of the maturity of various programs. I will be making it very clear what the results of those evaluations are, and certainly be making it very clear of the successes, or if we do not think they are working, I will be announcing that we are not doing them anymore. I have made that very clear. As I have said, there is no one report because there is a rolling series of evaluations. There will be individual reports on initiatives as those evaluations are completed. Of course, if there are any courtesies which need to be afforded to the Auditor-General as an independent body, then we will also observe those. Certainly, we will be absolutely transparent about the results of those evaluations.

**Mrs GERBER:** Minister, in 2021, your government said your measures were targeting the 10 per cent of serious repeat offenders. Last year that cohort increased to 17 per cent. Minister, just now you said that the cohort is 20 per cent of youths committing 50 per cent of all the crimes, or around 50 per cent of all the crimes. Minister, given the increase from 10 per cent to 17 per cent and just now to 20 per cent, do you admit your government's measures to target serious repeat offenders is failing Queenslanders?

**CHAIR:** Member, I think you are aware that there is an imputation contained within that question. If you would like to rephrase it, otherwise I will rule it out of order.

**Mrs GERBER:** Minister, given the cohort of serious repeat offenders has increased from 10 per cent to 17 per cent and just now the minister stated in her answers that it is 20 per cent of youths committing 50 per cent of all crimes, do you agree that your measures to target serious repeat offenders are not working?

**CHAIR:** I will give you one more opportunity, member. You are seeking an opinion. Can you please rephrase the question?

**Mrs GERBER:** Minister, given the increase in serious repeat offenders from 10 per cent to 17 per cent and just now the minister stated that the serious repeat offender cohort has increased to 20 per cent and they are committing 50 per cent of all crimes, are the government's measures to target serious repeat offenders working?

**Ms FARMER:** I thank the member for her question. I make a couple of points. The number of youth offenders overall has decreased significantly—by almost a third in 10 years. Of course, the proportion of young people who are now offending, who are serious offenders, has actually increased,

but the overall number of youth offenders is actually smaller. This is a serious cohort. As I said at the outset, one of my three priorities is to target that serious group of repeat offenders.

In total the group of young offenders in Queensland has decreased. The proportion of serious youth offenders as a proportion of that overall amount has certainly increased. It is why we are absolutely committed to addressing and targeting serious repeat offenders. It is why we have introduced some of the harshest laws in the country, it is why we have more young people in detention to keep the community safe, it is why we are building new detention centres and it is why we have committed almost \$450 million to our diversionary programs and to our early intervention and prevention programs.

These young people are the hard nuts. They are the serious repeat offenders with persistent exposure to disadvantage and they are hard to turn around. Members have heard me talk about the intensive case management system. It takes almost 12 months to turn around one young person who is in that category. However, I have said this many times: if any member—anyone—has any proposals or any evidence-based programs that can assist to address this complex problem, I would welcome those ideas. If the member herself has some ideas—

**Mrs GERBER:** I have written to you, Minister, already—Fight 4 Youth, Minister. I have written to you on a number of programs that are working amazingly in the electorate of Currumbin.

**Ms FARMER:** I have not seen those letters, I am sorry, but I certainly welcome any of those ideas. I am very happy to look at them and very happy to talk to you about them.

**Mrs GERBER:** I would be glad for you to have a meeting with Leisa Logan from Fight 4 Youth. That is what I asked for in some of my correspondence. If you would commit to that, that would be amazing.

**Ms FARMER:** This is my chief of staff; she is taking down the details now. I apologise that I was not aware of that correspondence. This is a complex issue. There is no jurisdiction in the world that can say that they have had 100 per cent success in addressing this. We are looking at the best evidence. I have made a commitment that what we do is based on evidence and that if those programs are not working, we will stop them.

**Mrs GERBER:** Minister, I will move on. I want to talk a bit about children in watch houses. Minister, in your statements in 2019 you made it clear that you did not want children in watch houses. We now have around 500 children in watch houses each month. Minister, has the government failed?

**CHAIR:** I will ask you to reword that question. There is an imputation, member. Please rephrase the question.

**Mrs GERBER:** Minister, your statements in 2019 made it clear that you did not want children in watch houses. We now have around 500 children in watch houses each month. Minister, why have these numbers increased?

**Ms FARMER:** Can I just say a couple of things? Responsibility for who is in watch houses actually falls to the police minister. We are seeing an increase in the number of young people going to detention because they are serious repeat offenders. Every young person, once they have been dealt with by the courts and once they have been charged, will go to a watch house. They are processed accordingly while they are waiting to go to a detention centre or wherever it is they have been directed by the courts to go. That is why when we have seen an increase in the number of young people charged under our very strong new laws, which the LNP supported, we have seen an increasing number of young people going to detention. All of those young people will go through a watch house. In terms of the increased numbers that we are seeing in the detention centres, which I have referred to, all of those young people will go through a watch house. We make no apology for keeping the community safe. It is why we have the laws in place that we do. We are charging more young people and they are going to detention.

**CHAIR:** Member for Stafford.

**Mr SULLIVAN:** My question is of the minister. Can the minister please outline the safeguards in place to make sure that the youth justice system is accountable?

**Ms FARMER:** I thank the member for his question. External reviews, reports and research of Queensland's youth justice system are welcome. We have referred a number of times already to the evaluation being undertaken by the Auditor-General and also by the director-general.

My department also works collaboratively with statutory bodies and oversight partners to address any systemic issues within the youth justice system. A number of those key organisations include the Queensland Family and Child Commission, the Queensland Audit Office and the Queensland Ombudsman. Highly respected people like former police commissioner Bob Atkinson have provided

invaluable contributions to the youth justice system. The department is responsible for delivering and implementing the key recommendations of those reviews.

With regard to oversight of the youth detention centres, for instance, the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture ratified in 2017 requires an independent national preventative mechanism to be established to inspect, monitor and report on the conditions and arrangements under which persons are detained. Our youth detention centres are overseen by several external bodies and are inspected quarterly by an independent team to ensure they are operating according to the law. There are six external bodies that regularly enter the YDCs: the Ombudsman with annual inspections and a new Inspector of Detention Services, who is yet to commence; the Public Guardian makes weekly visits; the Queensland Family and Child Commission; the CCC; the Human Rights Commissioner, the Coroner. Two internal bodies also regularly enter and report on YDCs: the Youth Detention Inspectorate and Professional Standards. The Inspector of Detention Services has the authority to regularly or randomly inspect places of detention and review their services at any time. In fact, quarterly inspections of the Queensland youth detention centres are a requirement of section 263 of the Youth Justice Act in terms of reports.

On 24 March 2023 the Queensland Audit Office initiated an audit with a focus on diverting young offenders from crime, and we have talked about that today. We have the Justice Reform Initiative and in May 2023 that initiative released a paper titled *Alternatives to incarceration in Queensland*. We are currently implementing a range of programs and initiatives as outlined in that report including intensive case management and restorative justice.

In 2021 the Queensland Family and Child Commission produced the Changing the sentence report. We had the Youth justice reforms review report from Bob Atkinson. To summarise, we in fact actively seek review and oversight of everything we are doing. This is a critical issue in Queensland and we will be held accountable and we seek to be held accountable for always doing the things that are based on evidence to deliver for the community.

**Mr SULLIVAN:** Minister, I was wondering if you could please provide the committee with an update on government resources in youth justice, particularly in relation to staffing?

**Ms FARMER:** The director-general referred earlier to some of the staffing issues that we have experienced in the youth detention centres. Just like every sector—we talked about this quite a bit in the earlier sessions of this hearing—workforce shortages are the No. 1 issue facing every sector and region. Certainly we have faced workforce shortages in youth justice, particularly in the youth detention centres. I do not think I would be surprising anyone here today to say that youth justice can certainly be a more challenging sector to work in than many others. Having returned to this portfolio in the last couple of months, I have to say publicly how proud I am to be the minister for this portfolio. The staff are absolutely dedicated to their job. I have been really overwhelmed by the stories of the commitment that I have been hearing across the state.

I have met a number of the staff again at our three youth detention centres, which are very challenging environments. Last week the director-general and I were at the Brisbane Youth Detention Centre and the West Moreton Youth Detention Centre to meet the health staff and hear their stories. They were telling us about a young person who had been detained there who is on their youth advisory panel and who is supporting with West Moreton Health to advise on how to address the health issues for young people in detention. He has become a leader. He presented at the Health Consumers Queensland forum in 2022 while he was still on remand. You see a sense of pride from those staff that the work they have done has managed to turn a person around and keep them from the youth justice system. We were all quite overwhelmed by the effort that had gone in from all the staff to make sure that young person had a life trajectory.

At one of our youth justice service centres, one of the staff was telling us about the work they had been doing in intensive case management with a serious repeat offender who they had worked with that person for nearly 12 months. They had slipped a couple of times, but after 10 months he was taken off the Serious Repeat Offender Index. That staff member was crying when she was telling us because she was so proud that what she was doing was having an effect. The heart and soul of our youth justice staff is absolutely overwhelming and I really want to give a big shout-out to them.

I reiterate what the DG said earlier, which is that youth justice is a great place to work, with some of the most dedicated people you could find. You can make a difference and we would really love to see people joining our team to address some of the staffing challenges that we have had at the YDCs. We have undertaken a national and statewide recruitment campaign. I want to commend the executive directors of our detention centres for doing work in their local communities, particularly in Cleveland, to

look at who is available in those local communities and to work with them to see the opportunities that are there for them.

We have had regular intakes of youth workers in youth detention centres. Everyone goes through a minimum six-week induction program so that they can ensure their safety and the safety of the young people who are detained there. We implement incident response training, so they are starting the work well prepared. As the director-general said, we are only about 12 FTEs short of our overall total, but we still want those 12. We have more rounds of inductions and recruitment happening later in the year, so I am letting everyone know that we would love to have them in this department.

**CHAIR:** Thank you, minister. Noting that it is 6.44 pm, the time allocated for consideration of the proposed estimates of expenditure for the portfolio of Minister for Employment and Small Business, Minister for Training and Skills Development and Minister for Youth Justice has expired. Minister, would you like to make a closing statement?

**Ms FARMER:** Thank you very much, Chair. I would like to thank the committee and the parliamentary staff. Firstly, we all know what an exhaustive process this is and I want to thank all of you for your commitment to making it a worthwhile hearing. I want to especially thank the Hansard staff. I express my thanks to my Director-General, Mr Bob Gee, and his executive leadership team, including at the table here today: Mr Steve Koch, the Acting Associate Director-General; and Ms Bernadette Harvey, the Acting Deputy Director-General of Youth Justice. To Holly Portley, Fergus Hogarth, Jenni Boles, Samantha Milliken and all of the department staff who have worked so tirelessly to help prepare for estimates. I would like to acknowledge my ministerial staff: my Chief of Staff Gayle Walters, Bernadette Condren, Gary Shipway, John Jarratt, Robert Tranent, Vickey Payne, Thomas Wealleans, Debra MacQueen, Matthew Stoward and Duncan Potter for their hard work in supporting me not just for today, but always. I especially like to acknowledge all the staff—the police, the victims, the mayors, the not-for-profit organisations, communities, local chambers of commerce, local councils and elected officials who have continued to work with us to keep the economy strong and our community safe. I am very grateful to walk alongside them.

**CHAIR:** Thank you very much. Thank you, minister. I take this opportunity to thank you minister, and to thank you, director-general. I thank all of the officials who have participated here today. I would like to thank my fellow committee members for their contribution today and the visiting members in this session that participated in the hearing. Thank you to everybody for making these a very valuable estimates process. I also thank our secretariat and Hansard. On behalf of the committee, thank you everybody for your participation in today's estimates for the Education, Employment and Training Committee. Thank you. I declare this hearing closed.

**The committee adjourned at 6.46 pm.**