

**Division 3: Department of the Premier and Cabinet — Services 1 to 3 and 6, Premier; Federal–State Relations, \$150 900 000 —**

Mr D.A.E. Scaife, Chair.

Mr M. McGowan, Premier.

Ms E. Roper, Director General.

Ms A. Pickrell, Deputy Director General, Intergovernmental Relations and COVID-19.

Mr C. Clark, Deputy Director General, Infrastructure, Economy and the Environment.

Ms F. Hunt, Deputy Director General, Aboriginal Engagement and Community Policy.

Mr G. Italiano, Government Chief Information Officer, Office of Digital Government.

Mr A. Brender-A-Brandis, Chief Finance Officer.

Ms E. Fells, Acting Executive Director, State Services.

[Witnesses introduced.]

**The CHAIR:** The estimates committees will be reported by Hansard. The daily proof *Hansard* will be available online as soon as possible within two business days. The chair will allow as many questions as possible. Questions and answers should be short and to the point. Consideration is restricted to items for which a vote of money is proposed in the consolidated account. Questions must relate to a page number, item or amount related to the current division, and members should preface their questions with these details. Some divisions are the responsibility of more than one minister. Ministers shall only be examined in relation to their portfolio responsibilities.

The Premier may agree to provide supplementary information to the committee. I will ask the Premier to clearly indicate what information he agrees to provide and will then allocate a reference number. Supplementary information should be provided to the principal clerk by close of business Friday, 3 June 2022. If a minister suggests that a matter be put on notice, members should use the online questions on notice system.

Are there any questions? I give the call to the Deputy Leader of the Liberal Party.

**Ms L. METTAM:** I refer to page 102 of budget paper No 3. Underneath the heading “COVID-19 Response” is the item “COVID-19 Coordination and Communications”. Given there was no allocation for this unit beyond 2022–23 in the last budget, what has led to the extension of this funding, particularly to 2025–26?

**Mr M. McGOWAN:** Just on a point of clarification, I want some advice about budget paper No 3. I always thought that questions could be asked under budget paper No 2 in this division on the Department of the Premier and Cabinet, rather than budget paper No 3. I just need to understand that, because I do not think I have budget paper No 3 here as part of my notes. I thought the standing orders indicated that it had to actually be part of the division.

**The CHAIR:** Just give me one second. While I am waiting for the Clerk to give us some advice, are there any other questions that members would like to ask?

**Ms L. METTAM:** I can ask the question in relation to budget paper No 2.

**The CHAIR:** Sure; if the member would like to give that reference, that would be helpful.

**Ms L. METTAM:** I refer to the spending changes on page 64 of budget paper No 2 and the line item “COVID-19 Coordination and Communications”. I am asking about the extension of funding for communications for the COVID-19 response.

**Mr M. McGOWAN:** There is funding for coordination and communications under spending changes. There is funding for continued policy coordination, management and communication of the COVID-19 pandemic response in Western Australia. An amount of \$31.69 million has been provided until 2025–26 to support the ongoing management of COVID-19. This includes \$6.1 million for full-time employees in 2022–23, \$6.3 million for full-time employees in 2023–24, and \$3.9 million—a significant reduction in FTE—for communications in 2024–25 to 2025–26.

The reason for that, as I have said many times, is that COVID-19 obviously continues to cause uncertainty and we need to continue our communications functions. One of the big successes of the last two years has been the communications that have advised people what to do and about doing the right thing. Some of the communications work includes providing responses to issues of concern, including variants of concern, the management of the impacts of long COVID and ongoing vaccination requirements. It also includes policy coordination and strategic engagement on across-government policy and implementation issues and strategies, including strategies to live with and manage COVID in the community. It involves ensuring that pandemic preparedness and response is built into all government policies and strategies; scoping economic recovery packages; researching, facilitating, communicating and reinforcing long-term behaviour change; protecting vulnerable cohorts in the health system; leading stakeholder engagement with the commonwealth government and other states and territories on emerging

COVID-19 issues and responses; monitoring the state's legislative frameworks to make sure that they remain appropriate; coordinating communications efforts across government to support WA's approach to living with COVID; and providing a whole-of-government communication service, including on the wa.gov.au site, Facebook, Twitter and those sorts of things. It is providing all those services across government to make sure that we continue to promote campaigns like the Build a Life in WA campaign, which attracts interstate and international workers to Western Australia. That campaign is being managed by the COVID-19 communications team in conjunction with teams from the Department of Training and Workforce Development and the Department of Jobs, Tourism, Science and Innovation. The team also has an ongoing stakeholder engagement function across the public sector, culturally and linguistically diverse communities, industry, community services and the like—it is all those sorts of things.

[1.10 pm]

The response to COVID rolls on. I recall that one of the criticisms of the opposition back in 2020 was that we were not spending enough on communications, so we are making sure that we provide that very comprehensive effort. As I said, the communications effort is one of the unsung success stories of the last two years, because people have been very compliant and understanding and have been doing the right thing. A lot of this will continue in the time ahead to ensure that we are in the right position to protect Western Australians and their jobs.

**Ms L. METTAM:** Can the Premier provide a breakdown of how many FTEs are attached to this commitment?

**Mr M. McGOWAN:** In 2022–23, it is 42 full-time employees, with 26 in communications and 16 in coordination. In 2023–24, it is 42 full-time employees, with 26 in communications and 16 in coordination. In 2024–25 and 2025–26, it is 12 FTEs, so the number in COVID communications activities will come down.

**Ms L. METTAM:** Are the 26 communications FTEs to which the Premier referred embedded within the Department of the Premier and Cabinet or within the Department of Health?

**Mr M. McGOWAN:** The unit is in the Department of the Premier and Cabinet in Dumas House. I visited there once. There is a range of staff there—externalists and communications people—working on those sorts of campaigns. As I said, we set them up initially in the basement of the Department of the Premier and Cabinet. It was a much bigger team during 2020 and it was highly successful. The number has come down a lot since those extreme days.

**Ms L. METTAM:** Does the Premier have a breakdown of what part of this funding is dedicated to advertising?

**Mr M. McGOWAN:** It is \$6.1 million for staff, including 26 for communications and 16 for coordination; \$250 000 for consultancy services; and \$8.62 million for communications activities, which I expect is for actual campaigns.

**Ms L. METTAM:** As the Premier said, the communications message is very important. What approvals process do the communications from this unit have to go through? Do they have to be considered and approved by the Chief Health Officer, for example, or the Minister for Health or director general of Health? What is the relationship there?

**Mr M. McGOWAN:** Health messages are confirmed by the Chief Health Officer and any such campaigns are done in conjunction with Health.

**Ms L. METTAM:** At the start of my question, I touched on the extension of funding. What has informed this? Was modelling done by the Chief Health Officer? Why are we seeing the extension of this funding going forward? Was it just the Premier's decision? What has informed the extension of the coordination and communications funding?

**Mr M. McGOWAN:** It has been extraordinarily successful. As I have said repeatedly to the member in the house, we have had the best health and economic outcomes in the world. That is partly because of this commitment. It is also important to retain the resource while we are still in this uncertain environment. We live in a very competitive state when it comes to retaining quality personnel; therefore, this funding certainty will allow us to keep the resource for whatever might occur.

**Ms L. METTAM:** Further to that, how much of the advertising and communications effort is dedicated to trying to attract the health workers required, or is that not part of this communications plan?

**Mr M. McGOWAN:** The Build a Life in WA campaign is about attracting staff, and that is worked on by these people. That allows us to seek to attract staff from interstate and potentially overseas. As the member knows, I am going overseas shortly to do some of that work. I understand that that campaign is coordinated by some of the people who work in this unit. The funding of that campaign is out of this bucket of money. There might be other campaigns run by Health to attract nurses, doctors, physios or whatever, and that would be worked on by the people in this unit, with some funding from Health for the actual communications campaign and ad buy and so forth.

**Ms L. METTAM:** The Premier said that he will be going overseas shortly as part of promoting or trying to attract health workers to WA. Is that what the Premier is referring to?

**Mr M. McGOWAN:** It is not really related to this, but that is part of what I will be doing while overseas, yes.

**Ms L. METTAM:** The Premier mentioned consultancy fees of \$250 000. Is any of that money, or, indeed, any of the other funding within this coordination and communications line item, being used for polling?

**Mr M. McGOWAN:** The department does not undertake polling. It conducts research and surveys as part of planning and evaluation of communications activities, as does any business. The research as part of the campaign and communications activity development allows the communications team to fully understand the target audience and how best to communicate with it. It develops insight-based communications with research, meaning stronger communications campaigns that are more likely to spark positive behaviour change. Evaluation surveys are undertaken at the conclusion of a campaign to allow the communications team to understand how the campaign performed. It does campaign evaluations, for instance of the Roll Up for WA campaign; it has undertaken vaccine hesitancy research; and it does workforce recruitment campaigns. It also does research to inform messaging and the creative approach, because what we think might work to attract a nurse out of Melbourne might not be what actually works. That is why we do research into these things. That is not unusual in an advertising campaign. It seems like a pretty modest sum of money for what we are trying to achieve. I repeat that no polling is done as part of that.

**The CHAIR:** Before we move on to a new question, I want to go back to the point of clarification that the Premier raised. I have been advised by the Clerk that questions on budget paper No 3 are acceptable, provided they refer to a particular page and line item in budget paper No 2. I think the Premier mentioned that possibly budget paper No 3 was not in the briefing pack; therefore, it might assist at least with the quick conduct of things if members could also make reference to those line items where they appear in budget paper No 2.

**Ms L. METTAM:** I refer to page 64 of budget paper No 2, volume 1, and the COVID-19 vaccination campaigns. Why will the funding for vaccination campaigns cease in 2022–23, given that the Premier obviously wants to achieve a third-dose rate of much higher than 80 per cent?

[1.20 pm]

**Mr M. McGOWAN:** This year we received a one-off allocation to support the vaccination campaign, because it was so extraordinarily important over the last financial year. I am just trying to place where we are. The vaccine rollout has largely been over the last calendar year. It was a massive effort. We are now at 99 per cent or thereabouts for first and second doses; and our third rate is 81.3 per cent, which I suspect will climb today. Western Australia's rates are Australia and world leading. If we need to do communications around that, I suspect we will. As I said earlier, we have allocated \$8.62 million for communications campaigns, so if we need to do more about vaccines into specific target audiences, that is what we will do. Certain groups—for instance, older people—are very heavily third dosed; some younger people not so much, and some parts of the state not so much, but 81.3 per cent is pretty high. If we need to do more, we will, but the last year has been a pretty amazing period for rolling out vaccines. That is what the money was for.

**Ms L. METTAM:** Just to clarify, if the Premier did want to reach and if he were challenged in reaching a target much higher than 80 per cent for the third dose, would he utilise the allocation for coordination and communications?

**Mr M. McGOWAN:** They can or they might want to work with us on another campaign. They have communications money as well. It could be one of those. If you think about it, out of 300, we are at 99 first, 99 second and 81.3 third, so we are at 279 out of 300 at this point in time; we have very high vaccination rates by world standards. Whether we need to do more, particularly broad campaigns, when such a small group is left out of the three doses, may not be the appropriate thing to do. We had very targeted initiatives targeting groups of people to get them vaccinated. As I said, the younger cohorts, the 20-somethings and 30-somethings, have not been as heavily vaccinated as the older community. We then have the fourth dose. We do not know what the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee will recommend on the fourth. Currently people over 65 and people who are immunocompromised are eligible for the fourth dose. Now the federal election is over, we are awaiting further advice from the AHPPC, the national body, on what more needs to be done on the fourth dose. I do not expect there will be any more mandates around that, but there may be a dropping of the age for eligibility for the fourth dose, which may require a campaign at some point as well.

**Ms L. METTAM:** I refer to page 64 under “Covid-19 Response”, and the quarantine project. Can the Premier explain exactly what that \$1.369 million was spent on and why there is no funding going forward? Further to that, could the Premier confirm whether he anticipates quarantine will be required after 2022?

**Mr M. McGOWAN:** In overall terms, it is an interesting project. Obviously, the commonwealth decided to do this quite late in the piece, when you think about it, and then it put an unrealistic time frame on construction. I think I might have said that I doubted it would be finished by March. They were hoping to have it open and being used in the lead-up to the federal election. They are building that facility from scratch out in Bullsbrook. The member might recall they were looking at a few other sites before they selected Bullsbrook. Multiplex, the builder, by all accounts, has done a very good job. The federal government came up with an amazing name, the Centre for National

Resilience. I have to give credit to their people in Canberra for coming up with that one! The Centre for National Resilience is under construction. Our component at this point is \$1.369 million for the project team working with the commonwealth. We provided in-kind support as well from various agencies—Health, Treasury, Finance, and the State Solicitor’s Office—and there were subject matter experts including financial advisers. The commonwealth is managing the construction. It is now 500 beds, but was originally 1 000 beds. The facility will be owned by the commonwealth and operated by the state, as long as required to respond to the pandemic.

The commonwealth originally intended construction to be completed by March this year. That date was very ambitious. I remember having a public argument with Hon Simon Birmingham. He said it was absolutely going to be done. Just on the basis of my experience with the construction market, I think I said I really doubted it, which turned out to be right. It is not due for completion until late June, early July. Sometime in July, there will be some sort of commissioning and operational process. What to do with it is the \$64 million question. I think it cost the commonwealth in the vicinity of \$200 million. What to do with it now we are not quarantining people anymore is an interesting question. I said all the way through, I want to work with the commonwealth, and having something there may be of great benefit at some point in time. There may be some use we can put it to outside a pandemic or a disaster. We have not quite landed on what that will be yet. We are seeking feedback from people as to what it can be used for. It is not in the heart of the city, so it cannot be used for backpackers or something like that. It is out in Bullsbrook near RAAF Base Pearce, so we are trying to think what else can be done with it. The decision to build it was not ours, but we worked cooperatively with the commonwealth and will continue to do so. We will work out the staffing arrangement and the longevity of our involvement and announce that shortly.

**Ms L. METTAM:** In the short term, does the Premier anticipate it will be operational once it is open or could it be the case that it is not even required once the project is complete and once it is open?

**Mr M. McGOWAN:** I do not think it is required for people to quarantine, unless there is another variant—or monkeypox! I do not know. I had not even heard of monkeypox before Friday, so who knows? That is not to say we should not get the systems up, get it furnished and make sure it operates effectively, should it be needed. As the member knows, every Christmas we have disasters like fires and cyclones. Perhaps there will be a use there at points during the year. Maybe there is a use for the commonwealth in terms of the people it deports each year. We will do our bit for a limited period, I suspect, to make sure it is operationalised and will work. Its long-term future has not been resolved as yet. I do not want to pour lots of money into an operating facility that has no-one in it. Initially at least, it is important to make sure it is capable of being operated. I expect that we will do our bit for a limited time to make sure that it is operational and that it will work. The long-term future of it, though, has not been resolved as yet. I do not want to pour a lot of money into an operating facility that has no-one in it. It is important to make sure that it is capable of being operated, and that is what we will do, at least initially.

It was a very late decision to build it. At the time I wondered why the commonwealth was doing it, but we did not know how long the pandemic would last. As the member will recall, eight city hotels were full. That is the bit that is lost to history. Thousands of people were working in eight quarantine hotels in the heart of the city, as was occurring in New South Wales and other states, although not so much in Victoria. It was a remarkable logistical effort and I would like to thank all those people. This facility was to take the load off all those hotels, but now we do not have anyone quarantining in any of the hotels. It is an interesting conundrum, but the good thing is that the state did not pay for it—the commonwealth paid for it—and it is there should we need it for anything in the future.

[1.30 pm]

**Ms M.J. DAVIES:** I have a question about the operational budget. Where will that funding come from? The Premier talked about getting ready to press go if it was needed and that a decision would be made about whether it would receive ongoing funding. Where will that funding come from? Is there provision for it somewhere in the budget?

**Mr M. McGOWAN:** Yes, it is under the Department of Health. When we take over the facility, we will make sure that it is properly furnished and is operational. Even though people might not be quarantined there, we will have to make sure that the systems work, should people arrive. It will have a minimum number of staff for a limited time and at the end of that period we will seek some use for it. As I said, it might be a facility for the commonwealth to use. I know that the commonwealth is deporting people with criminal records or who overstay their visas or what have you all the time, so the commonwealth government might want to use it for those purposes. It certainly would be a much more affordable option than what the commonwealth government does on Christmas Island. Maybe there is a use for it in that sense, but that is really a matter for the commonwealth.

**Ms M.J. DAVIES:** Am I right in saying that the commonwealth government will maintain responsibility for it, or will it hand over the facility to the state? Who has responsibility for maintaining it?

**Mr M. McGOWAN:** The commonwealth government owns it and has responsibility for it, but we will operate it while the pandemic is still alive, if you like, but that will be for a limited time. If there is no further need for a pandemic response, it might be used in response to a disaster or as a facility for people who are going to be deported. We will work with the commonwealth on that. Throughout this time, I have not tried to score political

points on it. Obviously, we did not know how long the pandemic would last, so the commonwealth decided to build it. If the pandemic went on for five years, everyone would be grateful, but it turns out that the requirement to quarantine has now expired and we will have this facility. We will be responsible for the facility's operation for a limited time. It will be very minimally staffed, because it does not have anyone in it, but we must furnish it and make sure that all the systems work, so that will take a while. As I said, it is a \$250 million investment. It is a massive spend. With 500 beds, I expect that it is quite big, although I have not visited it. The commonwealth is doing some of the water remediation in the area, which is great; that is the PFAS issue. A lot of that is being done as part of this work. In overall terms, Western Australia is better off, but I do not want a long-term, ongoing drain on the budget for something that does not have anyone in it. We will do our bit initially and see where it ends.

**Ms L. METTAM:** I am still referring to the spending changes on page 64 of the *Budget statements*. I note what appears to be a new line item for the Intergovernmental Relations Directorate and that the expenditure is to meet the current and future federal–state relations obligations, including national cabinet. What exactly will the \$5 million over four years be expended on?

**Mr M. McGOWAN:** It would be fair to say there has been a significant increase, by a multiple amount, in the area of intergovernmental relations over the last two years. Shortly, I will speak to the former Prime Minister. I think we had maybe 60 or 70 national cabinet meetings with agenda papers, and sometimes they were held on a twice-weekly basis. Ordinarily, we would have had four Council of Australian Governments meetings over that time. With 60 or 70 national cabinet meetings versus four COAG meetings, we can see the increased tempo. That was a massive increase in the workload. There were 67 meetings over two years, and sometimes they went for three or four hours. Members can see how intense the whole thing was. That required additional support to resource the Intergovernmental Relations Directorate. The Intergovernmental Relations Directorate leads to the development of advice in support of the Premier's participation in national cabinet meetings; it provides advice to support ministerial engagement; and it coordinates and manages collaboration within the state and liaises with other jurisdictions on a range of policy, funding and reporting matters. The Council for the Australian Federation, which is all the states and territories, has also increased its activity levels. The Intergovernmental Relations Directorate manages arrangements with the Australian government for Western Australia to provide services to the Indian Ocean territories and it provides advice to the Premier, ministers and senior officials on matters of state security and emergency management. It does a range of things, and it will continue to do them. The Intergovernmental Relations Directorate negotiates with the national cabinet on things like housing, homelessness, national skills reform and the implementation of the automatic mutual recognition scheme, which we passed through Parliament recently; it engages with the Council for the Australian Federation, as I said; and it leads the Department of the Premier and Cabinet in its involvement in royal commissions.

As members know, the commonwealth government has had four or five royal commissions, so the Intergovernmental Relations Directorate provides our important input into those. It also tackles national inquiries and coordinates WA's responses to them; it coordinates other commonwealth–state funding arrangements; it coordinates international relations, particularly the coordination of aid to other countries—we have done a little bit of aid work; and our relations with visiting delegations and so forth, I would expect. That group has done a lot of work.

**Ms L. METTAM:** I thank the Premier. How many FTE will make up this directorate, and what information will be obtained and maintained by the directorate within the Department of the Premier and Cabinet?

**Mr M. McGOWAN:** Before this funding there were eight FTE working in the area. This funding will provide for another eight FTE, taking it to a total of 16 FTE. As I said to the member, there has been a 15-fold increase in activity between the commonwealth and the states. Ordinarily over a two-year period there would be four COAG meetings, but there have been 67 national cabinet meetings over that time. As the member can see, the workload has increased significantly.

**Ms L. METTAM:** I can understand why the workload and the number of meetings would increase during a pandemic and when those important intergovernmental decisions are made in national cabinet, but how does the Premier justify doubling the size of this directorate within the Department of the Premier and Cabinet and dedicating such a line item for this purpose, given that we are now coming out of the pandemic?

**Mr M. McGOWAN:** I expect that the national cabinet will continue and that it will meet far more regularly than COAG did, and I expect that the new Prime Minister will ensure that occurs. I still think there will be a significant increase in the workload. The national cabinet cops a lot of criticism from some in the Sydney media bubble, but I think it was an inspired decision and that it works well. I know we do not always agree and there are fights and whatever, but I think it has worked incredibly well. Having that forum and having the support to make sure that the forum works effectively is a sensible thing to do. Sometimes we were having three or four meetings a week, and sometimes it was once every two or three weeks. I do not know; it may well go to once a month depending on the issues. I suspect that the national cabinet will broaden its role beyond the pandemic, and that is probably a good thing. I found that meetings of the Council of Australian Governments under Prime Minister Turnbull and one under Prime Minister Morrison were just a waste of time. They involved setpiece decisions that were always lined up

beforehand and the main thing was the grab a person gave to the media on their way into the meeting. Other than that, those meetings involved tedious and boring policy papers. Things were always sent off to some sort of committee of bureaucrats and no real decisions were ever made. National cabinet actually makes real decisions in a timely way, and that is a good thing. I did not know we could do that before such a time as national cabinet came along. I just thought that COAG was the way things happened, and it turned out it was not. Hopefully, the decision-making capacity, the flexibility and the quick movement of national cabinet will continue even outside of the extreme nature of the pandemic.

[1.40 pm]

**Ms L. METTAM:** The size of the Department of the Premier and Cabinet is to be doubled to 16 FTEs. What will be the make-up of those roles and what proportion of those roles will be dedicated to communications, for example?

**Mr M. McGOWAN:** I misunderstood the member before, so I will explain it briefly. During the pandemic an extra eight people were brought on. We currently have 16 people working there. This line item just reflects it in the budget. We had eight people working who could not keep up with the work because of the urgency and the demand, so in 2020 an additional eight people were brought on to take the number of staff to 16. The budget was not adjusted to account for that. The budget is now being adjusted to account for that. These eight people are not new; they were already there, and they were brought on quickly without the budget being adjusted. At that point in time, it was a Treasurer's delegated authority decision to employ those people—probably under the former Treasurer—and now the budget basically catches up with that earlier decision. The 16 people are working on all those things that I mentioned to the member before. I do not know what the specific policy role is for each individual, but I will take the member through the list of responsibilities again. The department and its staff are involved in national cabinet support; key funding agreement negotiations such as for national skills reform, housing and homelessness, and the National Disability Insurance Scheme; the implementation of the automatic mutual recognition scheme; the state's engagement with the Council for the Australian Federation, which is made up of the other states and has increased its activity, mind you; the four federal royal commissions; and responding to a broad range of strategic opportunities on national security and with federal elections. We put a lot of effort into getting support out of the commonwealth government prior to the federal election. The member might recall that in that budget we got \$2.5 billion of road funding alone—that was pretty good. Those staff were involved in all that work and certainly helped me with some of the meetings that I had with some federal ministers to secure that money. They are also involved in the national security arrangements that Western Australia is involved with, national inquiries and some of our international relations issues.

I will just repeat again that we do not have eight new people coming on. This just reflects the fact that we put on an additional eight people in 2020 and it brings to book the additional people who are working in this area.

**Ms L. METTAM:** I refer to page 64 of budget paper No 2 and the Perth Casino Royal Commission. Have the recommendations from the final report been implemented yet?

**Mr M. McGOWAN:** The commission delivered its report on 4 March and it was tabled on 24 March. It contains a range of recommendations. The department is coordinating its detailed consideration. We are working towards several immediate reforms, including the appointment of an independent monitor and an independent chair for the Gaming and Wagering Commission. We have already implemented several governance, cultural and regulatory reforms, including the appointment of a dedicated executive director for the racing, gaming and liquor division, additional resources for the Gaming and Wagering Commission and an updated conflict-of-interest policy. We have tabled the response, we have endorsed the recommendations of the report broadly—we may not have endorsed one of them; I cannot quite recall—and we are progressing with the recommendations. We do not just get a royal commission report and within six weeks expect all the recommendations to be implemented; some of it requires legislation. We have a big legislative agenda. Some of the legislative changes have a high priority to be drafted and, hopefully, will be introduced as soon as possible.

**Ms M.J. DAVIES:** I refer to page 64 of budget paper No 2, volume 1, and the significant issues impacting the agency. The Auditor General handed down a report that was published on 9 May. In it she made an observation that there would be a benefit from having a systemic and impartial examination of the response to the pandemic by both state and federal governments and its impact on the Western Australian community. We have been through the peak of the pandemic now and we are starting to transition. Would the government consider an examination to see whether learnings can be taken from the response over the last two years; and, if so, when might we learn more about that?

**Mr M. McGOWAN:** Sorry; which line item was the leader talking about?

**Ms M.J. DAVIES:** I was referring to significant issues impacting the agency and the COVID-19 response and recovery. The Premier just explained that the Department of the Premier and Cabinet played a major role in managing and advising him in his response to the pandemic. I am simply making the observation that the Auditor General in her most recent report said that there would be a benefit in doing an independent review of the way in which

COVID has been managed. She has certainly not said that things needed to be picked apart, but, for future responses, it would be of benefit, particularly to help frame deliberations around any future allocation of resources, the use of emergency powers and a cost-benefit analysis. I presume that a lot of this, as the Premier has explained numerous times in this house, has been done under extraordinary duress, particularly during the beginning months. At some point after an emergency of this type, outside the peak of the pandemic, it would make sense to go back and look at that. Does the Premier have a response to that and is it something that he is contemplating?

**Mr M. McGOWAN:** The pandemic has been the biggest public event in my lifetime. It makes sense to have some sort of analysis of what the country and the states did—did we do well, what could we improve and so forth—without it being a witch-hunt.

There is a recommendation from a Senate committee, which came down maybe three or four weeks ago, to do a national royal commission into it. If the commonwealth wanted to do that, I would not have any objection. I think we can be proud of a lot of things. If the commonwealth wanted to do that, that would be fine. I am a bit concerned about the state doing something in addition to that. It might overlap, so if the commonwealth decides to do that, we would have to consider whether we should do something at the state level because I would not want to be duplicating that. I think I answered a question on the state doing one. I am not at all averse to there being some sort of inquiry or review, or what have you, but I do not think it should happen until this thing is over, because we are still at 12 000 cases today with 300 people in hospital, 10 people in ICU, and, sadly, reporting, I think, six deaths from COVID in recent weeks. Launching an inquiry while the pandemic is still going does not seem to me to be sensible. Once it is widely accepted to be broadly over, pending what the commonwealth does, I am not averse to some sort of review. Regarding who does it and how it is done, I am happy to seek advice at that point in time. As I said, I do not feel at all embarrassed or have any sense that anything could have been done very differently from what we did. I am more than happy for some inquiry to look into these matters and see whether there are learnings for other states, other countries or for the future.

[1.50 pm]

**The CHAIR:** I think these questions are maybe a little far off the item the Leader of the Opposition is referring to, but the Premier has obviously indulged the question, and I am happy to allow it so long as the Premier is willing to indulge the question.

**Ms M.J. DAVIES:** Thank you, chair; I will take your guidance on that.

Again, I know that the opposition has asked for that, but the Auditor General also made that recommendation. The Premier indicated that there would be no objection when the pandemic is over. How does the Premier determine that? What are the parameters of when the pandemic is considered over? Is it at the end of the state of emergency powers? Is it when we transition across to the Public Health Act? I see South Australia has done that; it is managing the pandemic through its Public Health Act now. Is there some thought being given to how that will be determined?

**Mr M. McGOWAN:** I do not think there is any science on that. We might still have community cases at some point, even though we do not have the existing state of emergency. I do not have an exact answer. I would not have thought that any such inquiry, if there was to be one, would be before next year. As I said, if the commonwealth appoints a royal commission, doing a state inquiry might not be necessary or wise. We would have to take into account whether we did something or how we did it. I do not know whether we would have a parliamentary committee, an independent inquiry or a respected person in the community look at everything. I do not actually know at this point. Normally, inquiries are done when there is a perception that something went wrong. I do not believe that people in the state broadly, apart from some people who scream and yell at polling booths, would think that the state did badly.

**Ms L. METTAM:** I refer to page 72 of budget paper No 2, volume 1. Underneath “Cost of Services” is the line item “Employee benefits”. I note that the FTE for the department increases from 769 in 2020–21 to 856 in 2022–23, which represents an 11 per cent increase in staff. However, employee benefits fall from \$113 million to \$106 million in 2025–26. Can the Premier offer some explanation about the increase in FTE but this decrease going forward overall?

**Mr M. McGOWAN:** I request Ms Roper provides an answer.

**Ms E. Roper:** I refer it to our chief finance officer, André Brender-A-Brandis.

**Mr A. Brender-A-Brandis:** From the 2021–22 budget year’s 880 FTE, there has been an increase in that one year of two FTE with regard to executive government services. These are primarily for ministerial officers and oversight of parliamentary electorate office staff. In parliamentary support in that year there was a reduction of eight FTE, primarily with respect to the recalibration of the FTE overhead that was provided to parliamentary support. There was a reduction of 13 FTE in the whole-of-government service, primarily regarding State Law Publisher, some unfilled positions within the department and the timing for filling FTE positions. Aboriginal engagement had a minor reduction of two FTE year on year. That was mainly with respect to Aboriginal cultural heritage legislation. Information and communications technology had a significant increase that was predominantly with regard to

cybersecurity testing capability and accelerating citizen-centric digital services. The movement from 2021–22 through to 2022–23 saw a further increase of FTE for executive government services. This was a reduction of four FTE for that year. Again, that was a realignment of ministerial officers and oversight of PEOs. For parliamentary support, there was one FTE movement, which was a marginal adjustment to overhead FTE allocations across the service. The whole-of-government service saw a 22 FTE net movement for ongoing COVID coordination initiatives and additional resourcing for overhead FTE allocated to this service. Aboriginal affairs saw a slight reduction of three FTE, again for the cultural heritage bill and the Aboriginal Cultural Centre planning. The significant move that takes us up to the out turn FTE for 2022–23 is again for information and communications technology, with a 27 FTE increase. This is for the cybersecurity testing capability, including security operations centre positions, the whole-of-government data linkage and analytics, and the invoicing projects that have been taken on. That is the movement by service across those two years.

[2.00 pm]

**Ms L. METTAM:** On that movement and the general increase in staff, why are we seeing a drop in employee benefits over that period?

**Mr M. McGOWAN:** I will ask Mr Brender-A-Brandis to respond.

**Mr A. Brender-A-Brandis:** For clarification, it is the \$113.3 million in the 2022–23 budget year versus the \$26.7 million in the 2025–26 out year. Is that correct?

**Ms L. METTAM:** Yes.

**Mr A. Brender-A-Brandis:** Currently, analysis across the different categories and budget adjustments has not been performed between the four years. The allocation for 2025–26 is at this point only a budget estimate. The composition of the mix of FTE employed within the department and some of the projects being undertaken would comprise some of that adjustment, but we do not have exact analysis on that.

[Ms A.E. Kent took the chair.]

**Ms M.J. DAVIES:** I refer to page 64 of budget paper No 2, volume 1, significant issues impacting the agency and the COVID-19 recovery and response. I am looking for a little bit of guidance on whether the Department of the Premier and Cabinet had any role in the ordering of RATs or whether that was undertaken through the Department of Finance or the Department of Health?

**Mr M. McGOWAN:** Finance and Health had the responsibility for ordering the RATs but it was at the request of the State Emergency Management Committee of which I am a member.

**Ms M.J. DAVIES:** I seek some guidance on whether I can ask questions about RATs under this division. Did the Premier or the Department of the Premier and Cabinet have a role?

**Mr M. McGOWAN:** It is not funded here. It is funded out of the Departments of Health and Finance. Health ordered the vast majority and Finance ordered some as well. At the time we ordered them, the Leader of the Opposition will recall it was pretty dire and we got a lot. The good thing is that we do not have a shortage of RATs. Other states had shortages of RATs and had terrible problems in November, December, January and February just gone. We avoided all that because we had enough RATs. We continue to use and distribute them and they are important to all, getting people into the workplace and making sure people know whether or not they are positive.

**Ms M.J. DAVIES:** For the benefit of Hansard and anyone reading this in future years, we ordered rapid antigen tests, not rodents!

On the number and type of RATs purchased, the Premier might have seen in recent media that there have been some questions around the effectiveness of the lollipop-style tests. Was there any role played by or assessment done within the Department of the Premier and Cabinet on the most appropriate tests to order or did that again come through the emergency management team and the Chief Health Officer?

**Mr M. McGOWAN:** Obviously the emergency management team and I did not make the decisions on the type of rapid antigen tests selected or purchased. That decision was made by the Department of Health based upon the advice of the Therapeutic Goods Administration, which is the national body that approves these things. All the rapid antigen tests ordered were approved by the commonwealth authority. That is the basis on which they were purchased. I used one of the lollipop ones today; I thought it was quite effective.

**Ms M.J. DAVIES:** So that I can direct this to the appropriate place, if I have questions on the distribution and warehousing, do they go to Finance and Health?

**Mr M. McGOWAN:** Was that a question?

**Ms M.J. DAVIES:** Yes, it was, Premier. I was just asking whether the distribution, warehousing and warehousing costs, the expiry of any and the exposure levels that were appropriate were part of the decision made by Finance?



**Mr M. McGOWAN:** It was Finance and Health. I have been to one of the warehouses. We were very, very keen to acquire a large number and the Department of Health in particular went all out to get them. We got a lot so we have warehouses. We have distributed many millions now and that will continue.

**Mr D.R. MICHAEL:** I refer to page 64 of budget paper No 2 and the line item “ServiceWA Application Support Program” under the heading “Digital Capability Fund”. I understand ServiceWA was initially set up to respond to COVID-19 and included the G2GPass, the proof of vaccination certificate and the check-in system. Given we generally do not need to check in anymore, can the Premier provide an update on how the government intends to use the app in the future?

**Mr M. McGOWAN:** I thank the member for the question. The app was launched in January this year. It has had more than 1.2 million downloads—80 per cent of adults in Western Australia have done it. The app was launched to allow people to show their proof of vaccination, check in to venues with SafeWA and access the G2GPass for interstate travel all in one place. It has been an amazingly successful piece of technology. We led the country with how we managed COVID-19, but these requirements no longer exist except for specific venues like hospitals. In this budget we have allocated \$7.4 million from the digital capability fund to continue to support the app. As people’s lives have become more reliant on technology, we are exploring ways to deliver an increased number of services to the community in the digital world. We have seen other states move down this path. In the next day or two, we will add FuelWatch to the ServiceWA app. It is a very handy service that will allow people to find the cheapest fuel. It is a small step but it is very convenient, particularly when we have high fuel prices. We are looking at adding a digital Seniors Card SmartRider and emergency bushfire alerts. They are all being explored. In the long term, we could look at a digital driver’s licence, vehicle registration, getting and paying bills and paying fines and infringements. Migrating those services onto one app apparently is not easy technologically, but that work is being done. There is a lot of back-office infrastructure that is not as easy as it would seem that needs to be resolved in order to transition those services onto the app. I will ask Mr Italiano whether he wants to add to that.

**Mr G. Italiano:** To augment the Premier’s answer, we are working through that list of services presently. We are triaging those services into ones that can be adopted quite quickly because they are in a high state of readiness and others that will require greater investigation. Certainly, our intent is to have a regular addition of services to the app so that citizens keep receiving those values and options moving forward. That is our intent and certainly we hope over the course of the next year or so to have a large number of those services come online.

**Ms L. METTAM:** I have a further question on the digital capability fund. I note the line item “eInvoicing Pilot”.

**The CHAIR:** Is this a new question or does it relate to the last question?

**Ms L. METTAM:** It is under the same heading, “Digital Capability Fund”, and relates specifically to the line item “eInvoicing Pilot”. Noting the allocation for the feasibility study, has the contractor to build the e-system been identified and how will the pilot run?

[2.10 pm]

**Mr M. McGOWAN:** There is funding of \$725 000 to pilot a central e-invoicing platform, with three WA government agencies exploring the barriers and benefits of adopting e-invoicing in WA. Funding will be used by the department to procure an e-invoicing platform to appoint a project manager and things like that; develop a business case; and plan for whole-of-government implementation. The agencies are the Department of Justice and Main Roads, and a third agency is yet to be confirmed. The pilot will form larger scale implementation across WA government. E-invoicing is the digital exchange of invoices directly between the accounting systems of the buyer and supplier using a proven international standard that is highly automated and that the Australian Taxation Office estimates can deliver savings of up to 70 per cent of processing costs, compared with traditional paper or PDF invoices.

In April 2021, we joined the commonwealth government and other states in committing to accelerate the adoption of e-invoicing, with the object of shorter payment times to business suppliers. According to the ATO, Australian small businesses are owed \$26 billion in unpaid invoices at any one time. It brings efficiencies. The biggest benefits to businesses will be reduced payment times and improved business cash flows, especially in government purchasing transactions.

**Ms M.J. DAVIES:** I refer to page 72 of budget paper No 2, volume 1, and the line “Aboriginal Engagement Unit Grants”. It looks like the grants fall from \$8.2 million this year to \$1.4 million in 2025–26. Could the Premier advise why the grants are reducing and provide any detail in relation to grant recipients and amounts for 2021–22?

**Mr M. McGOWAN:** I will let Mr Brender-A-Brandis respond.

**Mr A. Brender-A-Brandis:** Just to clarify, it is the reduction of grants for Aboriginal engagement that the Leader of the Opposition is referring to?

**Ms M.J. DAVIES:** Yes. It is the top line on the “Details of Controlled Grants and Subsidies” table.

**Mr A. Brender-A-Brandis:** Is that on page 72?

**Extract from *Hansard***

[ASSEMBLY ESTIMATES COMMITTEE A — Tuesday, 24 May 2022]

p24b-33a

Ms Libby Mettam; Mr Mark McGowan; Ms Mia Davies; Chair; Mr David Michael

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**Ms M.J. DAVIES:** Yes.

**Mr A. Brender-A-Brandis:** Aboriginal grants reductions between 2021 and 2022—is that correct?

**Ms M.J. DAVIES:** Yes.

**Mr A. Brender-A-Brandis:** The reduction is primarily with respect to the Aboriginal Cultural Centre; the Mirning People Part B Indigenous land use agreement; the Bidyadanga ILUA; Martuwarra Fitzroy River Council—that is royalties for regions funding; Plan for Our Parks royalties for regions funding; Closing the Gap; the Dampier Peninsula project; and some minor ones with regard to reductions in the Gibson Desert Nature Reserve. They primarily make up the reduction of the Aboriginal engagement grants.

**The appropriation was recommended.**