

Chair; Mr Shane Love; Ms Jodie Hanns; Dr David Honey; Mr Peter Rundle; Mr Peter Tinley; Mr Matthew Hughes; Mr Stuart Aubrey; Ms Libby Mettam

Division 29: Fire and Emergency Services —

Mr S.J. Price, Chair.

Ms J.L. Hanns, Parliamentary Secretary representing the Minister for Emergency Services.

Ms M. Pexton, Acting Commissioner.

Mr C. Waters, Deputy Commissioner.

Mr D. Mosconi, Assistant Commissioner.

Mr M. Carter, Executive Director.

Mr P. Leach, Executive Director.

Ms G. Camarda, Chief Finance Officer.

Mr M. Dixon, Principal Policy Adviser.

[Witnesses introduced.]

The CHAIR: The estimates committees will be reported by Hansard. The daily proof 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.

A minister may agree to provide supplementary information to the committee. I will ask the minister to clearly indicate what information they agree to provide and will then allocate a reference number. Supplementary information should be provided to the principal clerk by noon on Friday, 31 May 2024. If a minister suggests that a matter be put on notice, members should use the online questions on notice system.

The member for Moore.

Mr R.S. LOVE: I refer to page 450 of budget paper No 2, volume 2, and “Additional Firefighters” under the heading “New Initiatives”. Close to \$23 million is spread across the budget and forward estimates to provide additional firefighters. Can the parliamentary secretary confirm that that represents a net increase of 60 FTE firefighters to Western Australia’s career fire and rescue service?

Ms J.L. HANNS: Yes, \$23.014 million was approved over the forward estimates period to fund 60 additional career firefighters to provide adequate resourcing for emergency management services throughout WA. The purpose of that is to bolster the frontline service of the firefighting unit. It is an ongoing commitment and over the next four years the additional 60 career firefighters will be online and employed in the career fire and rescue service. DFES is WA’s leading emergency management agency, delivering emergency management services to over 2.8 million Western Australians across regional and metro areas as legislated in the Emergency Management Act 2005. Due to a combination of demand and supply issues in recent years, the department has increasingly relied on overtime to meet minimum crewing requirements and deliver services. As a response to that clearly demonstrated need for those additional 60 personnel, the decision was made to fund those services. There are a couple of reasons for that, including fire seasons becoming longer and more severe; fire and emergency services personnel being more regularly deployed to assist with major incidents locally and nationally; and the increasing scale, severity and overlapping of incidents. Is there anything the commissioner would like to add to that?

Ms M. Pexton: I reiterate that the proposed onboarding of those will be 20 in each of the financial years, commencing and phased, starting from 2024–25 through to 2026–27. There will be 20 firefighters onboarded during each of those three years.

Mr R.S. LOVE: Further to that, on page 454 under delivery of frontline services, it looks to be only 11 FTE from 2023–24 to 2024–25. Does that include those 20, or is that a different number of personnel?

Ms J.L. HANNS: There is a note on page 454 with an explanation of the significant movements around that. It states —

The increase between the 2023–24 Budget compared to the 2023–24 Estimated Actual is primarily due to wages growth in line with the public sector wages policy and cost pressures ... In addition, some FTEs and associated expenditure were allocated to this service to more accurately reflect the timing of trainee firefighters being deployed to stations. The 2024–25 Budget Target reflects reductions in temporary FTEs and expenditure associated with enhanced recovery activities primarily in relation to Ex-TC Ellie, partially

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offset by an increase in costs associated with the employment of 20 additional firefighters in 2024–25 (the first tranche of an additional 60 firefighters).

Mr R.S. LOVE: Rather than 60 additional firefighters, there are nine fewer than the claim. There are 51 extra FTE, not 60, over the period.

Ms J.L. HANNS: I will direct that to the commissioner.

Ms M. Pexton: Thank you. I will get confirmation from our CFO, Ms Camarda.

Ms G. Camarda: Those FTE numbers relate to full-time equivalent employees under that frontline service. It talks about movement in FTEs in the recovery services space in CFRS—there is a number of FTEs that have gone up and down and that is the net impact. The 20 firefighters are included in that count. It is a net impact. That is why the note disclosure explains the movement in the FTE number.

Mr R.S. LOVE: The claim is that there are 60 extra firefighters, at 20 a year. Instead of that, in the first year there are 11 extra firefighters because of retrenchments of some additional people who were put on during the emergency situation. In fact, the claim is not quite right. There are actually 51 extra FTE compared to the FTE in 2023–24.

Ms J.L. HANNS: I refer that to the commissioner.

Ms M. Pexton: Thank you. I think the adjustments and the 11 FTE that the member is referring to relate to, as our CFO has explained, the adjustments in the FTE bases from this year. The additional 60 firefighters are the ones we are onboarding, with the 20, 20 and 20, with an overall total of 60 FTE for firefighters.

Mr R.S. LOVE: Thank you; with a reduction of nine to begin with, there will be 51 extra firefighters than existed before.

The CHAIR: Is that a question or a statement?

Mr R.S. LOVE: It is a statement, and I think we will move on from that matter. I think our positions have been made known.

Will this extra \$23 million be funded through the emergency services levy or through consolidated revenue?

[7.10 pm]

Ms J.L. HANNS: It is consolidated revenue.

Dr D.J. HONEY: On page 455 under “Works In Progress”, the table refers to “Primary Fire and Emergency Fleet” as part of the vehicle replacement program. Do the new fire trucks that are being introduced into service have the rollover protection fitted to them; the primary fire vehicles that are being brought into service?

Mr D. Mosconi: No; they do not have rollover protection, although we are investigating implementing rollover protection on some of our appliances.

Dr D.J. HONEY: My understanding is, and I am happy to be corrected on this, when the minister was looking at vehicles, an assessment was done on the relevant risk. The risk of vehicles fitted with airbags was chosen over a vehicle alternative that had rollover protection. When I was told that, I was intrigued. As I said, I am happy to be further informed on that matter. We have seen a number of vehicle rollovers. I would have thought that as fire vehicles are required to go into extremely difficult terrain, a rollover would be a more likely hazard in operational duty as opposed to minimising harm with airbags in vehicles. I am happy for comment on that and why airbags were prioritised over rollover protection. You are the experts, but my intuitive thought is that a rollover was a greater risk to human life than needing airbag protection.

Mr C. Waters: Correct me if I am wrong, but I thought it was the other way in relation to airbags. We moved away from having our bushfire response vehicles equipped with airbags because of their inadvertent activation while traversing through rough terrain and potential impacts from small shrubs on the way through. We shied away from introducing that type of vehicle into the fleet. Recent reviews have identified that rollover protection is required, and so we are undertaking the review to look at what our future fleet will look like going forward.

Dr D.J. HONEY: I will be specific rather than talk in generalities. I was informed by the local vehicle manufacturer OKA that the reason that vehicle was rejected, or the reason it was told that its vehicle had been rejected, was because it did not have airbags. It does have superb rollover protection intrinsically built into the vehicle’s chassis, whereas the vehicles that were chosen were imported vehicles that had airbags but did not have rollover protection. I think the point raised is very logical and reasonable. When you are crashing through the bush, you do not want the airbags going off and blinding drivers. But if airbags are subsequently not required, I am interested in the selection criteria that were then used for the vehicles.

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Mr D. Mosconi: I am not sure exactly why a particular model of vehicle was not chosen. That was part of the procurement process. From an operational perspective, although it is dangerous driving through the bush at a job, our most dangerous time is probably getting to an incident travelling under lights and sirens, exceeding the speed limit and going through uncontrolled and controlled intersections. I suggest airbags are important, but we want to have as many safety features as we can and include those in our vehicles. A lot of that comes down to a risk assessment process. As I said earlier, we are looking to see if we can implement rollover and full-on protection onto our trucks.

Dr D.J. HONEY: What is the anticipated timeline? I did not study this in detail, but by reading the paper I noted there have been a number of firefighting vehicle rollovers in recent times because we have had really severe fires in difficult terrain. Is there some sort of timeline for fitting rollover protection to the vehicles?

Mr D. Mosconi: No; we do not have an anticipated timeframe at this stage, although, as DC Waters advised, we are aware of some recent reviews. We are actively looking at what we can do in that space.

Mr R.S. LOVE: On page 457, there is a line item for “Local Government—Community Emergency Service Managers”. It states a budget figure for this particular year and an estimated actual of \$2 713 000, which is the same as the following year and increases fairly lightly in subsequent years. Why has there not been any increase in the funding in this program? I understand that a number of local governments have indicated that they would like to participate in the program but have been told that it is oversubscribed. I think there are at least seven local governments that we are aware of that have been unsuccessful in receiving funding. Could the parliamentary secretary explain why this is a static fund throughout the forward estimates when we have that demonstrated shortfall?

Ms J.L. HANNS: Firstly, at the outset, I would like to say that this has been a highly successful program. It is oversubscribed, which certainly indicates how successful that program has been. By way of background, local governments are responsible for emergency management across the prevention, preparedness, response and recovery spectrum. That is in relation to the Bush Fires Act 1954. Local governments are directly responsible for bush fire brigades. The community emergency service managers program was established in 2003 and provides the capacity to share costs associated with the delivery of emergency management services with local governments to assist them to build safe and resilient communities. The objectives of the program are basically in partnership with local government to enhance emergency services management doing things like coordinating and delivering strategic mitigation programs with stakeholders to reduce the impacts of the consequences of bushfires in the local community. They operate within a set of consistent protocols and equipment standards. There are others that I will not go through, but I can read them out if the member would like me to.

Essentially, the five key areas of focus for community emergency service managers are bushfire risk management plan development and maintenance; support for local government to comply with the emergency management legislative requirements; the development of volunteer capacity and capability to maintain competencies and skills; the provision of hazard and community engagement programs, which is incredibly important to educate local communities about fire hazards and emergency incidents; and operational response coordination in the local government jurisdiction area. We currently have 34 community emergency service managers who support 57 local governments across the state. Of those CESMs, 27 are local government employees and seven are Department of Fire and Emergency Services employees—27 plus seven equals 34. I am happy to see whether the commissioner would like to provide any further information about the role, but there is no additional funding in this budget.

[7.20 pm]

Mr R.S. LOVE: I do not need any information on the role. I am aware of the role. I am also aware that a number of local governments have not been able to participate in the program because it is fully subscribed at its current funding level. The question is to the parliament secretary, not anyone within the organisation, because it is a matter for government. If the government was aware that a shortfall existed, why did it not increase the funding? In answering, perhaps the parliamentary secretary could advise whether she is aware whether the minister’s office or the department received any requests from the Western Australian Local Government Association or any other local government to increase the level of funding?

Ms J.L. HANNS: As the member can see across the forward estimates, the funding is static. It is a successful program that is fully subscribed and at this stage there is no additional funding in the budget to expand that program. The member asked a question about local governments that have applied—can the member just repeat that section of question for me again?

Mr R.S. LOVE: I know that a number of local governments have applied for the program. In making a consideration about whether to increase the amount of funding for the program, has the minister’s office or the department been approached by any of the local governments or WALGA about the need to increase the funding?

Ms J.L. HANNS: The program has been very successful and it has been approached by other local governments. DFES will continue to look at different operational approaches and alternative regional service delivery options.

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WALGA included this in its pre-budget submission and a number of local governments were also involved, but I can certainly refer to the commissioner for other examples or strategies.

Ms M. Pexton: Thank you for the question, member. The parliamentary secretary is right; we have had a number of advances from local governments, and WALGA's budget submission certainly included a position that sought support for some additional resources, particularly for CESMs. This is an ongoing success from many of the activities that the department has been undertaking in terms of bushfire risk management mitigation activities, and certainly through the Rural Fire Division with a real focus on what those bushfire management activities could be. We, as a department, continue to provide options to government around what that will look like going forward, but a number of activities in the bushfire space support local governments across the board.

Mr R.S. LOVE: I have a final question. I am aware of seven local governments that have applied for funding support. Can the parliamentary secretary confirm how many local governments have applied for CESM funding support that have not been successful?

Ms J.L. HANNS: Can I just clarify that question? The member said that he was aware of seven —

Mr R.S. LOVE: I am aware of seven, but can the parliamentary secretary confirm how many local governments have approached the government for funding support that have not been successful?

Ms J.L. HANNS: Thank you for the question, member. We cannot confirm that number, but my adviser tells me that it is close to the number that the member mentioned. I am sorry but we do not have the specific numbers in front of us this evening.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: I refer to the table on page 450 of volume 2 of budget paper No 2 and the line item "Consolidated Emergency Services Acts" under ongoing initiatives. The funding for that line item is \$1.202 million in 2024–25 and \$1.078 million in 2025–26. It has been scaled down to \$504 000 in 2026–27 and there is no funding in 2027–28. Can the parliamentary secretary provide an update on the consolidated emergency services acts?

Ms J.L. HANNS: I thank the member for the question. Modernising the fire and emergency services legislation in Western Australia is a critical undertaking by the government. It is driven by the recognition that existing statutes such as the Fire Brigades Act 1942, the Bush Fires Act 1954 and the Fire and Emergency Services Act 1998 need more clarity, interoperability and consistency. Evidence from coroner's reports, inquiries and stakeholder feedback point to the urgent need for reform. The state government embarked on a journey to craft a new and improved act. On 8 April 2019, the cabinet approved drafting of the exposure draft bill for community consultation around that, presenting a model for the new legislation. Parliamentary Counsel's Office commenced drafting the exposure draft bill. Financial analysis is underway and the Department of Fire and Emergency Services had engaged the Western Australian Treasury Corporation to develop a cost model for implementing the new act. Cabinet and parliamentary processes will follow, including public consultation for at least three months once cabinet approves the release of the exposure draft bill. Feedback from stakeholders will be absolutely crucial in refining the legislation, with cabinet approval sought for new drafting instructions for the final bill to be introduced to Parliament.

It is really important to understand that overhauling three pieces of quite old legislation and consolidating them into a single act is a formidable task for the drafters and everybody involved in that work. The prioritisation of this work has resulted in significant progress from the government's perspective. When released, the consultation draft bill will provide stakeholders with a proposed legislative model aimed at making Western Australia a safer state.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: Can the parliamentary secretary outline what those three amounts of funding are actually for?

Ms J.L. HANNS: I will defer that question to the commissioner.

Ms M. Pexton: That funding is inclusive of some FTE to support this significant project. Obviously, we are doing some significant consultation processes in that. We also heard about how we are engaging with the Western Australian Treasury Corporation, and some other activities around engagement and consultation are inclusive in those figures.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: The DFES website states that —

It may take several years to develop the new CES Act and the supporting regulations.

Is this a concession that this bill will not be passed during this Parliament?

Ms J.L. HANNS: I am going to defer that question to the commissioner. Just by way of clarification, the exposure draft bill is still being drafted. As parliamentary secretary, I have no understanding of where that is at the moment, so I will defer to the commissioner.

[7.30 pm]

Ms M. Pexton: Yes, it is still under drafting at this point in time, and as soon as it is finished drafting and it goes through the normal parliamentary process, it will be released as an exposure draft bill.

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Mr P.J. RUNDLE: Given that this started in April 2019 and we are five years down the road, I interpret that to mean that this will not be passed during this Parliament.

Mr P.C. TINLEY: Is that a statement or a question, chair?

The CHAIR: Patience. Member for Roe. Thank you, member for Willagee.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: What is the status of the interagency working group formed to provide advice on the act, and when did it last meet?

Ms M. Pexton: That interagency working group continues to meet. I do not have the very last date that it met with me, but it is still an active group that, as I indicated, is still being consulted for the purposes of the drafting.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: I note that on 12 September 2023 the minister told Parliament that the exposure draft bill would be released for stakeholder consultation in early 2024. That obviously will not be the case. I know the parliamentary secretary has outlined the timeline, but it would appear that that timeline has been delayed. Can the parliamentary secretary put any cause or reason behind that delay?

Ms J.L. HANNS: We still have a month to go, but I will defer that question to the commissioner.

Ms M. Pexton: We are continuing to draft; that is the reality. I cannot confirm the timeframe on that at this time.

Mr R.S. LOVE: I refer to the local government emergency services grants under the details of controlled grants and subsidies page 457 of the *Budget statements*. Last year's figure was \$33 million; for this current year, the budget is \$35 million; the estimated actual is \$32 million; and there is \$37 million in the budget year ahead. Are the funds allocated to each year fully expended each year? In other words, are the grants given out in full to local governments for each year or is there residual money in that program that has not been allocated over time?

Ms J.L. HANNS: This item refers to the provision of capital and operating grants to local governments to fund bush fire service brigades and State Emergency Service units. The 2024–25 budget year includes a re-profiling of 2.183 million from 2023–24. The lower than estimated actual expenditure achieved in 2023–24 is mainly due to the consequence of delays in completion of the local government grant scheme capital projects stemming from the local government grant scheme vehicle program and the local government dependant facility projects. I am happy to defer to the commissioner for any additional information.

Ms M. Pexton: A number of factors have influenced the ability for either the money to be dispersed or for those local governments in receipt of those funds to deliver on that. Just for the member's awareness, some of that is due to supply restrictions that were enforced by the original equipment manufacturers when we were talking about the high global demand and erratic component supply, particularly in our appliances. There are production limits and delays, again, in the manufacturing plants, resulting in orders being applied to an Australian dealer network that would have been considerably lower than the demand we could meet. The high-volume requirements for our various chassis are being supplied at rates of one to two and five a month, so that has obviously slowed down some of that expenditure getting through. The introduction by the original equipment manufacturers of new model cab chassis during 2023–24 has determined a degree of recertification and re-engineering of the appliance design requirements across a number of our Department of Fire and Emergency Services fleet classes, which, once again, in turn causes a delay on the transition to full-scale production programs. Just finally, a number of those approved facility projects, the facilities, have also been delayed due to those unforeseen issues associated with land tenure, provision of utility services and other planning-related issues. Cost escalation is also very evident across most projects, resulting in further delays, with some of those projects' scopes also being reviewed.

Mr R.S. LOVE: In the completed year 2022–23, money had not been spent by the local government but it had been allocated. Does that money remain open and available? Does it sit in a bank account somewhere ready to be spent? Is that the case or is the grant lost because it has not been paid out in time?

Ms M. Pexton: Yes, that is still able to be spent.

Mr R.S. LOVE: Even though 2023–24 is not finished, would it be correct to presume that all the money has been allocated?

Ms J.L. HANNS: That is correct, yes.

Mr R.S. LOVE: Whether now or perhaps by way of supplementary information, could the parliamentary secretary tell me for the applications that money has been spread over, how many were made that met all the criteria but were not funded, and what was the total funding requested that was not able to be funded?

Ms J.L. HANNS: The information is not in the budget. There is a line item that refers to the expenditure but it does not indicate the numbers.

Mr R.S. LOVE: I am sorry. I could not hear what the parliamentary secretary said.

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Ms J.L. HANNS: The line item says what the expenditure is but the budget does not detail the number of allocations. It just indicates a financial line item.

Mr R.S. LOVE: I am aware what the budget line item says, but I am asking for further information about that, which is a normal process in estimates. Is it possible for the parliamentary secretary to provide me with the number of applications that were made for this program that were not successful and what the total amount of funding that was not able to be met might have been?

Mr P. Leach: We do not have those details here at the moment, but, yes, part of the money is allocated, and the bit that is unspent, according to the reasons of the commissioner, will be carried over. But we do not have all the detailed information right here, right now about all the applications that were submitted, which ones are eligible, which ones were not, which ones met the criteria for approval and which ones did not meet the criteria. We do not have the information right here today.

Mr R.S. LOVE: I am aware that the information is available, which is why I am offering the opportunity for it to be provided as supplementary information; otherwise, I will just ask a question on notice.

Ms J.L. HANNS: I advise the member to place that question on notice and we can attend to it through that process.

Mr R.S. LOVE: I turn to one final matter. I assume that there was a heavily oversubscribed program because that is what I was led to believe. If that is the case, would the government consider expanding the program or the scope of this grants funding to better meet that demand in the future? In other words, if there is a continual oversubscription, perhaps the parliamentary secretary may prevail upon the government that this needs to be increased.

[7.40 pm]

The CHAIR: Parliamentary secretary, that question asks you to give an opinion and take a view on something. It is not technically a budget line item specifically, but you can respond how you see fit.

Ms J.L. HANNS: It is probably the same response that we provided around the community emergency services manager. This is fully subscribed. It is obviously very successful, and there is no additional money in the budget for the expansion of that project.

Mr R.S. LOVE: This question is similar to the last one. Did the minister or DFES receive any request from local governments or the Western Australian Local Government Association to increase the amount of money available under the local government emergency services grants round?

Ms J.L. HANNS: I will defer to the acting commissioner.

Ms M. Pexton: Thank you, member, for the question. Yes; we receive a number of grants through the application process, as the member has outlined and as we have outlined. That is oversubscribed. We recognise that. The Western Australian Local Government Association has positions, as the member has indicated, on what it advocates for on behalf of its members. DFES goes through the local government grants scheme processes, assesses those grants and distributes the moneys that we have available to us.

Mr M. HUGHES: I refer to page 450 of budget paper No 2 and the heading “Spending Changes”. Can the parliamentary secretary explain how the strategic partnership model at the Bushfire Centre of Excellence will provide enhanced community safety?

Ms J.L. HANNS: Having visited the Bushfire Centre of Excellence, I can say what an outstanding facility and outstanding asset it is for emergency services management. The Bushfire Centre of Excellence is the first of its kind in Western Australia. It serves as a comprehensive resource for knowledge dissemination, technical expertise, scientific research and training for bushfire responders and emergency services personnel, including for exams. The day that I went there, a number of people were undertaking exams and were as stressed as I had ever seen those people. It was quite surprising, actually.

The Bushfire Centre of Excellence is a central learning and event hub, as well as being accessible to all bushfire management stakeholders. The strategic partnership model will be established to help expand the centre’s network of partners and enhance its ability to deliver a broad spectrum of services, including knowledge dissemination, technical advisory services, scientific research and training. The model will also help to diversify the array of services provided, including training, engagement and outreach, knowledge management and business administration.

Examples of the potential programs and projects that may be delivered through the strategic partnership model include, amongst many others, building planned burning capacity across agencies and organisations that are responsible for managing fire; collaborating with industry, academia—this is a significant asset here in relation to this part of the response—state, territory, national and international partners to foster the development and sharing of bushfire research, management expertise and best practice; establishing a unit of competency in cultural fire to

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be delivered through vocational education providers; offering scholarships for training and accommodation for regional Aboriginal rangers to participate in training programs; and initiating community safety projects aimed at enhancing bushfire preparedness.

It is an incredibly exciting opportunity, and I am sure that all the people involved in bushfire mitigation and management will benefit from that asset into the future.

Mr M. HUGHES: I hope my question relates to the work of the bushfire management entity. Under the spending changes, I noticed that reference is made to the Spatial WA business case. Is that being undertaken by the Bushfire Centre of Excellence? Is that in fact being done by DFES itself?

Ms J.L. HANNS: It is being undertaken by DFES but not for the Rural Fire Division.

Mr M. HUGHES interjected.

The CHAIR: No freelancing—what are you doing, member! I call the member for Cottesloe.

Dr D.J. HONEY: It was remiss of me at the outset not to recognise that it is National Volunteer Week and acknowledge today's emergency services volunteers. Thank you, parliamentary secretary, for allowing us to recognise that with our ribbons.

Ms J.L. HANNS: May I add something to that, member?

Dr D.J. HONEY: Absolutely, parliamentary secretary.

Ms J.L. HANNS: We threw directly to questions, but I had a brief statement to read out at the beginning that was going to do exactly that, so thank you, member.

Dr D.J. HONEY: Maybe the parliamentary secretary can read that out in full, in response, before she answers my question. That would be appropriate, I think!

I grew up in the bush. We have a little family farm down in the bush, and I go down there regularly. I will say that the quality of the firefighting vehicles provided to the rural fire services and the provision of the safety equipment is first rate compared with when I was a boy, when it was a 200-gallon tank, which was pretty well unrestrained on the back of a truck, and we would just put on a woollen jumper and long pants and boots if we had them. It really is something to behold. There was a bushfire right next to our farm at Christmas and the speed with which the locals responded and put the fire out was remarkable. It was all volunteers. I just say thanks for equipping them so well. It is very impressive in those areas. But that is not a question, so thanks for your indulgence, chair.

I have a simple question that I am sure the parliamentary secretary can quickly answer. In each of the services and the key efficiency indicators, there is an income recognised. How is that income derived? I apologise, chair; it is on page 453, services 1 and 2, and then over the page to service 3. There is an income statement on page 456, which I have a further question on, but how is the income applied to those services? What is the methodology that is used to apply that income? It is my assumption that the income is as stated in the total income line on page 456, and I assume the regulatory fees and fines are the emergency services levy income, plus fines. I would just like an understanding of how the budget is put together, parliamentary secretary.

Ms J.L. HANNS: In relation the funding of services, I will defer to Acting Commissioner Pexton.

Ms M. Pexton: Just to clarify, yes, those fines and regulatory charges are the ESL, so thank you, member—I was nodding. I will defer to Ms Georgina Camarda for that response.

Ms G. Camarda: Just to start with, that income that is used for all three efficiency indicators relates to total income in the income statement, which excludes income from the state government. The methodology we use, where we can, to allocate or apportion the income across the services is a direct revenue allocation to the type of activities within those services. I do not have the actual methodology in front of me to describe to the member, but there would then be an apportionment or a weighted allocation of the income as well. It is quite a large calculation, but it is part of our cost allocation and revenue allocation methodology.

[7.50 pm]

Dr D.J. HONEY: Just to clarify—I was not concentrating at the start—does that allocation of income exclude the income from government?

Ms G. Camarda: Yes.

Dr D.J. HONEY: I am not trying to be tricky, but those numbers add up to \$596 million and the income, including government income, adds up to only \$442 million, so I thought it would have to include the government income as well.

Ms G. Camarda: Those revenue amounts should total \$442 million.

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Dr D.J. HONEY: Yes, sorry, the cost was the \$596 million; I apologise. Does government make up the balance?

Ms G. Camarda: Yes, the net cost of service element in each of those efficiency indicator tables shows the cost to the government rather than the income derived by the department specifically through its regulatory fees and charges, and grants revenue from the commonwealth and other revenue.

Dr D.J. HONEY: At the bottom of page 456 is a surplus/deficiency for the period. In this case the surplus is increasing across the forward estimates. What is the logic behind the income from government exceeding the cost of the service? Why are we building up this buffer of surplus for the period? As an ancillary question to that, does that surplus accumulate somewhere or is it just folded back into the next year and consumed and another surplus generated?

Ms J.L. HANNS: I am certainly not an accountant either, so I will defer to the acting commissioner.

Ms M. Pexton: Thank you, and I will refer back to our chief finance officer.

Ms G. Camarda: It is a good question. This one is quite complicated. We generate income to fund our assets as well. When we generate surpluses, it is often related to our programs not having delivered as we anticipated, so our expenditure in that year is not as high as we have anticipated and we have had carryovers. If the member likes, I can take that question on notice and give him a better explanation. There could be other reasons.

Dr D.J. HONEY: Could I ask the parliamentary secretary to provide as supplementary information the reconciliation of the surpluses generated? As part of that, what happens to that surplus? Is it consumed in the next year or is that surplus accumulated in another account?

The CHAIR: Parliamentary secretary, I ask you to explain what you are willing to provide.

Ms J.L. HANNS: Sure; we can provide the member the information he is seeking. Just for clarity, could he explain succinctly what he is seeking?

Dr D.J. HONEY: I am very happy to do that, parliamentary secretary. How is the surplus that is generated at the end of the year derived? What is the purpose of accumulating a surplus, given that the government is making up the difference? What happens to that surplus—is it simply folded back into expenditure in the next year or does it accumulate somewhere else?

Ms J.L. HANNS: Thank you; there are three parts to that question.

[Supplementary Information No A26.]

Mr R.S. LOVE: I turn to the significant issues impacting the agency on page 450 of budget paper No 2, volume 2. Paragraph 1 states —

Western Australia has continued to experience an increase in the frequency, intensity, and impact of natural disasters.

Despite noting that natural disasters are becoming more frequent and intense, does the state government provide any contingent funding to leverage commonwealth funding to rebuild damaged or destroyed assets—roads, bridges or buildings—so they are more resilient against future events?

Ms J.L. HANNS: The Department of Fire and Emergency Services has been proactive in adapting its strategies to the escalating threats posed by changing climate. The significant initiative is around the bushfire management frameworks and enhancing those by refining land use planning regulation in bushfire-prone areas. The department also supports the State Emergency Management Committee and its commitment to delivering strong action to increase the climate resilience of the emergency management sector. The SEMC, as the peak body for emergency management in Western Australia, provides strategic oversight of emergency management arrangements and advises the Minister for Emergency Services on the preparedness of the state to be able to combat those emergencies. Further measures taken by DFES include intensifying its efforts in community engagement and education programs, which is an incredibly important part of that work. It has also bolstered its firefighting capabilities by investing in additional equipment training and resource allocation. I will throw to the acting commissioner for further information on that.

Ms M. Pexton: In addition to what our parliamentary secretary has just outlined, the member mentioned commonwealth grants. DFES administers a significant number of programs on behalf of the commonwealth that eligible applicants across a raft of sectors, whether that is local governments, not-for-profit organisations, other state government agencies and other critical partners, can apply for. Some of those are in the disaster ready fund. It is the second year that this has been released and there has been a significant uptake in those across the state. The national disaster risk reduction program has incredible partners that can apply for funding.

Of course, the primary mechanism, particularly for betterment, when we see post-emergency and the “build back better” concept, is the disaster recovery funding arrangements. I think WA has really maximised that in recent

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events—for example, with ex-tropical cyclone Ellie. The bridge was damaged significantly and was rebuilt in record time, with a significant component of betterment included in that. We have advocated strongly to the commonwealth government about the ability to build back better. We are pleased to hear that we are able to include the element of “betterment” in our disaster recovery funding arrangement packages in order for many of these communities with this infrastructure that may be more vulnerable, as the member framed the question, with regard to climate change that we can incorporate into our activities as we move forward.

Mr R.S. LOVE: Thank you; however, the question was whether the organisation keeps any contingent funding—now that it has that arrangement with the commonwealth—to leverage against that to ensure that the infrastructure and community assets are built back better and are more resilient. Is the department setting aside money to enable that to happen? Is that something the state government is doing? In order to leverage some of the commonwealth funding, I would have thought there would need to be some seed money from the state.

[8.00 pm]

Ms J.L. HANNS: I will defer to the acting commissioner in a minute, but hot off the press today, Western Australia was successful in receiving a \$2.5 million national disaster risk reduction grant. That media release was sent out today. It is a joint initiative between the Australian and Western Australian governments. The National Disaster Risk Reduction grant program has now funded locally led products to the tune of \$12.5 million, so that is significant and the details were released today. It includes grant recipients from the Shire of Victoria Plains, the City of South Perth and the Shire of Toodyay. I am just trying to find recipients that would be relevant to the member! There is also the Shire of Boyup Brook, St John Ambulance and the Volunteer Marine Rescue Service Port Hedland, to name just a few.

I am happy to pass to the commissioner for further information.

Ms M. Pexton: After each emergency, we apply for that funding under categories C and D, which I realise sounds a bit like lingo, but under the disaster recovery funding arrangements, we have the ability to request additional funding from Treasury in support of the activities that are based around the needs of those individuals. The betterment component, as I have indicated, is relatively new, so we will be exploring those avenues as we go forward with these emergencies.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: I refer to page 455, budget paper No 2, volume 2, and the line item “Primary Fire and Emergency Fleet”. We have roughly \$22 million a year for 2024–25 and 2025–26, and then it drops to \$18.9 million in 2026–27. Is there an explanation for that drop-off?

Ms J.L. HANNS: Can the member just repeat that for me so I can follow that line item across?

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: It is under the subheading “Vehicle Programs” on page 455, under the heading “Works in Progress”, and it is about 10 lines down from the top.

Ms J.L. HANNS: Again, I will provide some information to start with, and then defer to the commissioner. As was recognised by the member for Cottesloe, there was significant investment by government in appliances. I am sure the commissioner will detail some of that shortly. Investment in these service vehicles across Western Australia continues to bolster our firefighting capacity. Currently, the Department of Fire and Emergency Services’ operational fleet consists of more than 1 600 vehicles, and they are capable of responding to a range of hazards, including bushfires, structure fires, cyclones, rescue, storms, floods and HAZMAT incidents. A number of appliances have been provided. I will hand over to the commissioner to detail some of that for the member.

Ms M. Pexton: As the parliamentary secretary has outlined, there is a significant number of vehicles across a number of our career fire and rescue services, volunteer fire and rescue services, and a number of our other brigades, groups and units. With regard to the member’s specific question about funding and how that will feature in the out years, I might pass to Assistant Commissioner Mosconi.

Mr D. Mosconi: Yes, there is a reason for the reduction in funding in 2026–27. With our forward planning, we expect our urban pump program to slow down, given that we will be putting a lot of effort into that over the next number of years. The requirement to replace those pumps in the fleet will be less. Because they are such a complex vehicle, they are quite expensive, which is why there is a reduction in that particular year.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: Can the parliamentary secretary explain that pump? Is it a vehicle or a pump on a vehicle?

Ms J.L. HANNS: I will pass that to Commissioner Pexton.

Ms M. Pexton: For that question, I will pass to Assistant Commissioner Mosconi.

Mr D. Mosconi: We call it an “urban pump”; it is a fire truck, and I guess it is a fire truck that will still attend bushfires, but is primarily used for road crash rescues, HAZMAT incidents and structure fires.

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Mr P.J. RUNDLE: In last year’s budget estimates discussions about the service life of each vehicle in the primary DFES fleet, it was identified that some 281 vehicles continued in operation beyond their approximate service life. Can the parliamentary secretary provide us with the status of the primary fleet replacement program, given that fairly large number?

Ms J.L. HANNS: I will defer to the commissioner.

Ms M. Pexton: Member, I will defer to Patrick Leach.

Mr P. Leach: Yes, we have had prior questioning on that, and also questions outside the estimates process. The terms used have been slightly different, but have significant meaning in our strategic asset planning world. There are a number of definitions, including “extended life”, “service life”, “operational life” and “extended service life” et cetera. Depending on the terminology and the question, that often results in a different answer. Part of what we explained last time is that all the vehicles we have now in our operational fleet are fully operational, fully functional and fully serviceable, and we inspect them regularly. All our operators, career and volunteer, are also trained in twice-daily inspections—when they turn up, and when they retire the vehicle. If they detect anything at the operator level, they are able to lodge a vehicle fault report, which then goes back to the workshops and the faults are rectified. In the sense of having a number of vehicles that are arbitrarily past some particular life, that is a much more complex conversation, depending on which particular statutory asset planning terminology is being used in a particular question.

To alleviate a lot of that confusion, I prefer to say to people that all the vehicles we have are regularly inspected, regularly checked and are operational, functional and serviceable. They are well within the original equipment manufacturer’s operating provisions. To give the example of our large Scania fleet, and especially the urban pumps or urban fire trucks that we use, we often retire them based on our parameters of somewhere between 200 000 to 250 000 kilometres, regardless of the chronological age. The manufacturer’s specifications go up to 900 000 kilometres, so we are well within that. As Assistant Commissioner Mosconi alluded to earlier, these are very complex appliances, especially the more modern ones that we are now building. From memory, I think they have 38 onboard computers and two control area network buses that connect all those computers to each other. They have multiple operational hydraulic functional parts on the back end, which do not come as part of the cab chassis.

The point at which we retire them depends on a lot of those components, so it is not as simple as saying “At particular X years of age, this particular appliance is now non-serviceable”. For example, an appliance might go into a particular geographical area and it might do 2 000 kilometres a year, while another one might be doing 200 000 kilometres a year. It is a very difficult proposition. It also goes to life, as Assistant Commissioner Mosconi again alluded to earlier. Some of these things are, for want of a better term, bush-bashing a lot more than others, while others are staying on very sedate, bituminised roads. They have different lives, even on the basis of chronological age and kilometres of usage. Some of them have a hard life and some have an easy life, but we inspect them regularly, and at such time as we believe them to be no longer operational, serviceable and functional, they are retired.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: Thanks for that comprehensive answer. I hear what is being said in relation to those vehicles being inspected and on track, but we were given the figure last year of 281 vehicles beyond their approximate service life. Is there any indication of that figure this year? Is there a reduction or an increase? That figure was supplied last year, so has there been an improvement in that number? Is there any answer to that?

[8.10 pm]

Ms J.L. HANNS: I have the *Hansard* here from last year. I can see what the member is referring to. I am happy to hand the question to the commissioner to respond.

Ms M. Pexton: I think, given the explanation that we have all just been given, we can see that we do not have a current figure linked to the figure that the member has requested or is referring to from last year. I will just confirm with Patrick Leach to see whether there is any other numerical indicator.

Mr P. Leach: Again, no. This is the bit that goes back to the definition in the question that was asked at the time. If we were to do it, we would need to go back and ascertain the person who was answering the question, what particular strategic asset planning definition they used to come up with that number and then go through that same methodology and apply it today to come up with a similar quantitative number. But again, it is a rather arbitrary and almost academic response. I think I mentioned in one of the prior estimates sessions that the answer for how many vehicles we have that are unserviceable, non-functional and non-operational is zero. We have zero in our fleet because of the regular checks that we do, literally at the start and end of every shift.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: I hear what Mr Leach is saying. How many vehicles have been scheduled to be replaced in 2024–25 and is there a breakdown of that information?

Ms J.L. HANNS: I would be very happy to provide that information. I actually prepared because I saw that the member was in the chamber. I have gone through and highlighted some of the ones that might be of interest to him,

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and some others. We will go through it now that Mr Leach has explained what an urban pumper is for us all. These vehicles are all slated for delivery in 2024–25. Kalgoorlie will receive an urban pumper type 1, Busselton and Carnarvon will receive an urban pumper type 2 and Katanning, Kojonup and Ravensthorpe will receive an urban pumper type 3. I am just picking examples here. Australind, Esperance, Goomalling, Katanning, Kojonup, Lancelin, Narrogin, Northam, Port Hedland, Quairading, Toodyay, Hope Valley, Geraldton and Kalgoorlie will receive light tankers. There will be a general rescue utility vehicle at Bruce Rock, Bremer Bay, Coral Bay and Morawa, by way of example. The member can see that that is a significant asset rollout over the next 12 months.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: Is the parliamentary secretary able to supply that by supplementary information?

Ms J.L. HANNS: I can keep reading for the member, if he prefers.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: How many are roughly on there? Is it in the dozens or hundreds?

Ms J.L. HANNS: I can give the member a definitive answer: there are 123 appliances on the list.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: I know that 62 vehicles were identified in last year’s budget to be replaced in 2023–24. I assume that might be something similar to that particular number. Does the minister actually have a total?

Ms J.L. HANNS: It is 123.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: Okay. I think I will leave it at that.

Mr M. HUGHES: My question is about the criteria that are applied to the replacement of urban pumpers and the observations that I have made to the parliamentary secretary regarding the Kalamunda Volunteer Fire and Rescue Service. On the face of it, the volunteer fire and rescue service’s urban pumper was so many years old. I think it was provided at the time when Hon Michelle Roberts was the responsible minister. The number of kilometres that piece of equipment covers in any one year is quite small by comparison, despite the age. I just want to echo that despite the fact that it was lobbying me again for those changes at the recent annual dinner, it really is a question of making sure that every vehicle that is on the road is serviceable, up to scratch and capable of carrying out the functions it is there for. I just wanted to re-emphasise that. That is all.

The CHAIR: New question, member for Roe—member for Cottesloe.

Dr D.J. HONEY: I thought I was being shunned there!

I refer to budget paper No 2 on page 157 and the heading “Details of Controlled Grants and Subsidies”. The line item “Severe Tropical Cyclone Seroja” is five lines from the bottom. There is a total there of around \$41 million of funding. I was intrigued to see that funding continue into 2024–25 and 2025–26. I was interested in what that funding was for. Before the parliamentary secretary provides that answer, I am also very interested in her opening statement on volunteers, with the indulgence of the chair.

Ms J.L. HANNS: My opening statement on Wear Orange Wednesday? Is that correct? By way of recognition of our State Emergency Service volunteers, today is WOW day. It is obviously marked by the wearing of orange. I am very pleased to see the sea of orange in the chamber this evening. This is an annual day of recognition to say thank you to all of our State Emergency Service volunteers. I am sure a lot of us have those volunteers in our electorates.

I just want to acknowledge that buildings and landmarks across Western Australia, including Parliament House this evening, are lit up orange in recognition of the contribution that our SES volunteers make. In addition to that, regional centres, including Albany, Kalgoorlie, Broome and Kununurra are also lit up for this particularly important day.

I just want to acknowledge that over the last year, nearly 2 000 SES volunteers have devoted more than 32 600 hours responding to incidents across the state, including most recently the destructive Bunbury tornado on 10 May. On behalf of everybody in the chamber, who I hope I can speak for, I recognise the volunteers who play an incredibly important role.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: Thank you, parliamentary secretary. I will go back to the severe tropical cyclone Seroja funding, which continues out in the next budget and the year after. I am intrigued about what that line item is for.

Ms J.L. HANNS: In 2021, the commonwealth and state governments announced several funding packages to support the recovery of communities impacted by severe tropical cyclone Seroja under the commonwealth–state joint disaster recovery funding arrangements. The state-led recovery services concluded on 30 June 2023, with the management of ongoing recovery activities transitioned to local government. This occurred in line with the closure of the local recovery hubs and the conclusion of several recovery programs.

The state and federal governments acknowledge that communities impacted by cyclone Seroja experienced slow progress with restoration, repairs and resilience works due to factors outside of their control, particularly within the Shire of Northampton. In response, four severe tropical cyclone Seroja recovery grant programs were extended until 31 December 2024 to allow more time for those works to be completed.

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Additionally, the jointly funded clean-up program remains open to financially support the Shire of Northampton to progress with the clean-up and repairs of the foreshore. A dedicated Department of Fire and Emergency Services grants team including a midwest based regional grants support officer continues to provide support to grant applicants.

In July 2023, the state government also made available \$9.2 million to eligible local governments impacted by the cyclone to support local recovery initiatives. Of the funding, \$8 million was disbursed from the tropical cyclone Seroja local government resilience fund, with grants of up to \$500 000 to help local governments undertake works to improve the resilience of evacuation facilities and other community infrastructure.

I am happy to see whether the acting commissioner would like to add any extra detail to that.

[8.20 pm]

Ms M. Pexton: As outlined by the parliamentary secretary, the member will recall that cyclone Seroja struck, unfortunately, eight weeks after the Wooroloo bushfire and also during a time when COVID was quite prominent in our communities. With the regional location, 16 local governments were impacted by that cyclone and there were significant delays for rebuilds. We extended the two programs that have been indicated through to December 2024 as a response to the needs of those communities. It would have been very unfair for us to shut the door on that. We have worked very closely with the commonwealth government.

The figures we see for the next two years are there to ensure that the grants that were made available for eligible applicants, particularly home owners and the local government, which had both Northampton and Kalbarri requiring remediation, can still fulfil those obligations and have access to that funding.

Dr D.J. HONEY: Are there any grants that people are still eligible to apply for or is this fulfilling commitments that have already been made? Is it just extending the funding to enable things to be constructed using the resources that are available?

Ms M. Pexton: That is a good question. The disaster recovery funding arrangements are through a reimbursement model. All the applications have been received. It genuinely is just about ensuring that those applicants have time for the works to be completed. Once they have provided that evidence to the grants team that the parliamentary secretary outlined, we will reimburse them. The money is made available for those reimbursement costs as deemed eligible.

Mr S.N. AUBREY: I refer to page 461 and the heading “Bushfire Mitigation Branch”. I want to ask the parliamentary secretary about the status of the Department of Fire and Emergency Services’ rollout of 2024 bushfire awareness campaign; and how has it improved community safety?

Ms J.L. HANNS: I thank the member for the question because community safety education plays a significant role in managing community safety. The 2024 bushfire awareness campaign has been successful in enhancing community preparedness and resilience. With the threat of a severe bushfire season in 2023–24 that will run longer than usual, the campaign set out to increase the community awareness of their bushfire risk. With 93 per cent of WA being bushfire prone, it was important that the community was made aware that it takes only 15 minutes to prepare a bushfire plan that could save their lives.

I spoke to members of my community and encouraged them all to be part of that planning for themselves and their families and I happened to call, unbeknownst to me at the time, a volunteer firefighter and I tried to explain to him it was very important that he prepare a bushfire plan for him and his family. He explained that he was well aware of the risks, and it was a very interesting conversation.

A record number of bushfire plans have been completed, with 6 181 plans completed during the campaign, more than three times the number completed the previous year. The My Bushfire Plan WA app helps users make the critical choice of leaving early or staying to defend and has important prompts, including what to do with pets and what is needed to evacuate, and ensures everyone in the household knows the plan and their role within that plan. Bushfire plans include comprehensive strategies for fire prevention, evacuation procedures and communication protocols tailored to each person’s specific needs and risks.

Through proactive engagement and education, the Department of Fire and Emergency Services continues to empower residents to make sure that they have the knowledge and resources to mitigate the impacts of bushfires and safeguard their own lives and property.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: I refer to the bushfire mitigation branch and the breakdown further down the page. The line item “Grain Harvest—Aerial Fire Suppression” has \$1.912 million in 2024–25 and then nothing in the forward estimates. Can the parliamentary secretary provide an explanation of that?

Ms J.L. HANNS: Sorry; was it page 461? Sorry, member; I was thinking about my volunteer bush firefighter that I was trying to advise on bushfire plans. I was slightly distracted.

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The Western Australian grain industry is a major contributor, as the member well knows, to the agrifood sector and the Australian economy. WA produces, on average, 18 million tonnes of grains—cereals, oilseeds and pulses—each year. Grain exports generate more than \$5.9 billion on a five-year average for the WA economy each year, making it the largest agricultural sector in the state, as the member knows.

The grain harvest aerial fleet initiative is instrumental in protecting regional communities, farming assets and grain production. Crop fires are often sparked by machinery or lightning and when combined with dangerous wind conditions, they can escalate very quickly. Two strike teams, each consisting of two 802 single-engine air tankers and one Air Attack fixed-wing aircraft, are based in the grain-growing regions to boost firefighting capability during the hottest stretch of the harvest. The Department of Fire and Emergency Services undertakes a capability assessment that assists in identifying the appropriate level of aerial suppression resource allocation to address the predicted bushfire risk on any given day. By strategically basing the aircraft in the areas where the risk is, response times are reduced and regional communities and harvest are better protected. The two strike teams are moved to different operating bases throughout the midwest, Gascoyne, wheatbelt and great southern regions as the harvest progresses or if response to active fires require it. The four identified operating bases are Geraldton, Cunderdin, Narrogin and Esperance.

The program is funded by the Department of Fire and Emergency Services with support from the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions and the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development.

I am very happy to ask the commissioner if she would like to provide any further information that I may not have covered.

Ms M. Pexton: I am going to defer to Deputy Commissioner Waters for some further operational information.

Mr C. Waters: I thank the member for the question. If the member remembers, initially this was a trial back in the 2021–22 fire season when the first record harvest was forecast by the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development. We did the trial initially in the 2021–22 fire season. That was then funded by reprioritising funding from the mitigation activity fund through the Rural Fire Division. We extended the trial into the 2022–23 fire season year based on a significant 20-million-tonne forecast harvest period. Obviously, for the forward estimates for the next year, 2023–24, again, \$1.23 million was funded similarly through the mitigation activity fund emergency service levy reprioritisation. Additionally, the Expenditure Review Committee has approved additional funding this year and that is going to be funded through reprioritisation of the mitigation activity fund.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: I have heard a lot of talk about the grain crop and what has happened in the past, but there is no money in the out years. To me, this is one of the most important elements of bushfire mitigation. I know that down towards Esperance and the like it is very important. It is important right throughout the whole grain belt regardless. Is there any explanation, parliamentary secretary?

Ms J.L. HANNS: There is currently no funding for the grain harvest strategy beyond 2024–25. Acknowledging the incredible response that was provided, all I can say is that at this point in time, there is no funding beyond 2024–25.

[8.30 pm]

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: That is concerning.

I will ask a fresh question. I refer to page 450 and the emergency rescue helicopter service under the heading “Ongoing Initiatives”. There is \$18.6 million in additional spending over the forward estimates. Can the parliamentary secretary outline what this spending relates to? It is obviously an increase, but what will it be providing?

Ms J.L. HANNS: The Department of Fire and Emergency Services remains dedicated to enhancing Western Australia’s aerial emergency services capability. The state government’s recent investments totalling nearly \$27 million, as the member has noted, have significantly upgraded and strengthened the existing service. The emergency rescue helicopter service is based strategically to efficiently cover regional area bases in Jandakot and Bunbury. Fuel caches are strategically located for extended missions. The strategic bases in Bunbury and Jandakot provide coverage for about 91 per cent of Western Australia’s population without the necessity of refuelling stops. I understand there is additional information that I will ask the commissioner to provide.

Ms M. Pexton: I will defer to Deputy Commissioner Waters.

Mr C. Waters: Thank you. The emergency rescue helicopter service, as the parliamentary secretary stated, is based at Jandakot and Bunbury. We have additional fuel caches strategically located to extend missions if required. The emergency rescue helicopter service is positioned effectively and efficiently to respond to just over 91 per cent of the WA population from those areas. The strategic bases in Bunbury and Jandakot, as I said, provide coverage and that is without any requirement to refuel at the time. There have been significant increases since it was introduced back in 2003. We enhanced the equipment on the helicopters in 2010. We introduced night vision capability in 2015.

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We introduced the Bunbury helicopter service in 2016. We introduced a third technical backup helicopter in 2018. We anticipate bringing on the first of the new Leonardo AW139 helicopters into service in July this year.

The capability of the new helicopters will increase the range from the current 400 kilometres straight range up to 700 kilometres. The speed of the new helicopters will be 39 per cent faster than the old helicopters. Helicopters can be forward based in other regions during large-scale incidents as required. We saw those deployed during the Carnarvon and Kimberley floods and in response to cyclone Seroja. We sent them up to Exmouth for the total solar eclipse earlier in the year. The service finished its 10 000th mission on 24 April, which was fantastic. It was sponsored by RAC WA, funded by the state government and managed by the department.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: I take it that we are not adding a further helicopter. We are not going from two to three. This funding is for the upgraded high-standard faster variety. Will we retain two helicopters with the ability to cover more than 91 per cent of the area, or will they still retain around 91 per cent?

Ms J.L. HANNS: My understanding is that there are two, but a third additional helicopter is available to be deployed. I will defer to the commissioner on that.

Ms M. Pexton: I will defer back to Deputy Commissioner Waters.

Mr C. Waters: Increased costing around the contracts and increased costing of the supplementary provisions of the clinical paramedics increase the amount.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: I note the Chief Health Officer's inquiry into aeromedical services identified significant under-resourcing of rotary-wing capacity in WA. Does the state government intend to address this concern, and can the parliamentary secretary identify any line items in the budget that will address that matter?

Ms J.L. HANNS: The Minister for Health is the minister responsible for that inquiry, so that is a question to be directed back to the Minister for Health.

Dr D.J. HONEY: I refer to paragraph 1, "Community Awareness, Education and Information Services", on page 453 of budget paper No 2. I assume the metric in the table below is, in terms of an efficiency indicator, \$15.27 per household in the state. The number of full-time equivalent employees who are providing that service has gone from 33 in 2022–23 to 43 in 2023–24 and then it reduces to 38 in 2024–25. Can the parliamentary secretary outline what that service provides and why we have seen a reduction in FTE for that service?

Ms J.L. HANNS: The note on page 453 states —

The increase between the 2023-24 Budget and both the 2023-24 Estimated Actual and the 2024-25 Budget Target is primarily due to wages growth in line with the current enterprise bargaining award agreements, cost escalations for service contracts, and additional expenditure of approximately \$2 million per annum over the forward estimates period for the Next Generation Emergency WA project. The increase in income correlates with the increase in the Total Cost of Service.

As to the efficiency indicators, I will defer to the commissioner.

Ms M. Pexton: I will defer to our chief finance officer for clarity on that.

Ms G. Camarda: Sorry, was the question in relation to the FTE?

Dr D.J. HONEY: It was a multi-pronged question to confuse the CFO through the parliamentary secretary. I was asking what service is provided for that amount, and why we are seeing a reduction in the FTE for that service. The cost is going up, and I think the parliamentary secretary has explained that in part, but the FTEs are decreasing for that service.

Ms J.L. HANNS: I can probably answer the portion of the question the member asked about what the service provides. In terms of community awareness, education and information services, it is about getting information into the community before an incident and providing emergency hazard information during an incident. It uses channels like social media, call centres and television and radio interviews to ensure the community is aware of preventable and natural hazards and support their ability to make choices about the actions that they take. As to the second part of the member's question, I will defer to the commissioner.

Ms M. Pexton: I will speak to some of the projects that the parliamentary secretary has outlined. Noting the activities undertaken, we have a significant number of projects that are currently funded to support those. One good example is the EmergencyWA upgrade and our next generation warning systems. Some of those FTEs are wrapped in that project funding. I think some of the reduction that the member might see is because of the way the FTE is funded in this financial year. It does not necessarily mean that we have fewer people undertaking that activity, it is more in terms of projects that have come online to deliver those activities.

[8.40 pm]

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Dr D.J. HONEY: I understood that the fire brigade, or the fire emergency services, has had a program to identify fire bugs and then to have some sort of education program that is quite specific for at-risk individuals. I am not quite sure of the right terminology. Is that part of that services web or is that something completely different within the fire service?

Ms M. Pexon: Please correct me if I am wrong, but I think the member is referring to our Juvenile and Family Fire Awareness Program. The FTE for that remains as it always has. We also run that program with associated volunteers and firefighters, which enables that program to be delivered as very much a place-based model whereby the central FTE train those individuals who have come on board to deliver these with our families and our juveniles. Those FTE may not be included as an FTE because of the volunteering nature of those roles. Yes, that program is still in existence.

Dr D.J. HONEY: I want to clarify that I am not suggesting that all juveniles are fire bugs. But I wondered whether there was a bespoke program. The commissioner has answered the question.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: I refer to page 455, “Fixed Repeater Tower (Esperance)” under “Works In Progress”. My recollection is that this is one of the recommendations out of the review of the tragic Esperance fire. Could I have an update on the situation with that fixed repeater tower, noting that it is in the 2024–25 budget year?

Ms J.L. HANNS: I knew the member would be interested in this item. I am very pleased to let the member know that funding for the construction of the new repeater tower in the Esperance region was approved in 2022–23. There have been delays in securing a suitable site for that tower. Alternative solutions are being considered, including using Starlink satellite technology to facilitate emergency communications in the area. There is a carryover of \$355 000 that was approved in the 2023–24 budget to 2024–25 to allow the Starlink solution to be explored.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: Given that Starlink has only just been rolled out in a lot of agricultural areas, is the parliamentary secretary confident that we will have the continuity and the coverage that is needed for the repeater tower?

Ms J.L. HANNS: I will defer that one to the commissioner. I have a personal opinion on that, but we will not explore that today!

Ms M. Pexon: Thank you, parliamentary secretary. I will defer to Patrick Leach to comment.

Mr P. Leach: We acknowledge the critical role telecommunications play in community safety and emergency response efforts across the state. It appears nationally in pretty much every single after-action incident report or inquiry et cetera. It is a vexed issue in emergency services, especially in the regions. There is exponential growth and reliance on data communications and information systems, and that partly goes to the projects we discussed earlier in terms of the next generation WA improvements. We are hoping to get a lot more information out through digital networks. Part of the issue with telecommunications in the regions is that often, as we have experienced in the state, these events themselves, be it a storm, cyclone or bushfire, actually damage the terrestrial-based infrastructure. That terrestrial-based infrastructure may be both mobile network operators like cell towers or mobile phone towers. Even if the mobile phone towers themselves are not damaged, it may well be energy infrastructure that is damaged. When the energy runs out, batteries run out and backup fuel supplies like diesel are difficult to replace, so telecommunications go out.

One of the solutions that we have been investing in a lot and exploring a lot is the low-earth orbit technology across a range of areas and scenarios. As with all technology, it has its pros and it has its limitations. One of the pros of low-earth orbit technology is that now it is basically accessible anywhere across Western Australia and the jurisdictions that we cover, which is roughly 2.5 million square kilometres of land. People often forget about the marine rescue people. We also cover about 1.5 million square kilometres of ocean. That is about four million square kilometres in total. We have that accessibility via low-earth orbit technology. We are actively exploring its suitability. It gets rid of a lot of impediments like topography and terrain, which are often the issue with point-to-point technology. It obviously gets rid of the mobile phone limitations. Telecommunication providers do not have infrastructure across the entire state of Western Australia, and the further out you go from dense populations, the lower the coverage becomes until it eventually becomes zero.

We have been experimenting with low-earth orbit technology as have other government agencies. It is working really successfully. I will give one of the limitations. If there are significantly dense atmospheric conditions like thick cloud, thick storms or lightning, there may be some interference. But, as I said, all technologies have their pros and cons, so we are exploring it. In terms of the Esperance scenario, we have tested low-earth orbit technology there. We have already deployed it across a number of use cases. We have re-enabled both other government agency telecommunications through our DFES low-earth orbit infrastructure, and we have also enabled community reconnection of telecommunications. At this point, it is still limited to pilots and trials.

One of the other digital programs that we are working on is the emergency services digital strategy. This will explore, pilot and trial exactly those types of technologies. The community has a higher expectation of service delivery. The

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community's tolerance, even during times of emergency, for lack of communications, has become increasingly lower. The more we move to digital technology for information provision, the more that telecommunication becomes important. We are actively exploring it. It works in the environment around Esperance, so it is just a question now of building up the model and getting the infrastructure and then rolling it out.

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: This was one of the main recommendations of that review. The department is looking at alternatives, as has been alluded to. I seek the parliamentary secretary's reassurance that it is the absolute commitment of the department that there will be a repeater tower in place, hopefully some time in the next few months or this year, regardless of the technology that is required to maximise the efficiency.

Ms J.L. HANNS: I absolutely acknowledge how important it is to the community in Esperance. It remains a priority for the government and, I am daring to speak on behalf of the commissioner, I understand it is certainly our priority for DFES to deliver this for your community—absolutely.

Ms L. METTAM: I am hopeful that I can ask a question about page 452, item 3, "Delivery of Frontline Services Before, During and After Incidents" under "Service Summary" in relation to the C130 Hercules water bomber. As I understand it, this was leased last December and has been leased from time to time for its capacity to build containment lines. Can the parliamentary secretary provide an update on the usage of that equipment and the length of its lease arrangements?

[8.50 pm]

Ms J.L. HANNS: In response to your question, it is obviously an incredibly important asset for Western Australia and the government has made a significant investment into this. Unfortunately—we can say this when we work in fire and emergency services—we know it is needed, and several times this summer I was watching it on the flight radar doing its best work across the southern part of the state. I just wanted to say that in recognition of how important it is.

The Department of Fire and Emergency Services is responsible for the biggest emergency management jurisdiction in the Southern Hemisphere. That is an incredible feat for the agency. To address the fire risk over such a vast area, \$11 million over four years has been committed to contract a dedicated large air tanker to be permanently part of the seasonal aerial firefighting fleet. The contract to secure the LAT will be in place from 1 December to 28 February each year during the state's high-threat southern bushfire season. The large air tanker is based at Busselton Margaret River Airport during the most vulnerable times of the year. It is the second year that the dedicated LAT has been contracted exclusively for Western Australia. The state previously relied on the national large air tanker aircraft. Obviously, time is of the essence when responding to the very large emergencies that the LAT has been able to provide support for. I am happy to pass to the commissioner to see whether there is any further information.

Ms M. Pexton: I am going to pass to Deputy Commissioner Waters for his operational knowledge on this matter.

Mr C. Waters: Although the confirmed dates are from 1 December to 28 February, we actually brought the large air tanker on around four weeks earlier this year to combat the significant increased risk in fire behaviour and the deficit in soil moisture, specifically in the south west land division. On the back end of that contract, we extended it out two or three times in two-week intervals to the end of April. We could not extend it any further because it had other contracts in the Northern Hemisphere to which it had to respond. Over the course of its use, the WA large air tanker did 59 drops totalling just under 750 000 litres of either suppressant or retardant at 19 significant incidents. We also requested and were able to get the New South Wales large air tanker across to WA on a number of occasions to assist during those blow-up days and when we had elevated fire risks. At the time, New South Wales was dealing with floods and other significant rainfall, so it was an opportune time to get that tanker across to compensate for the extended and high risk that we had.

Ms L. METTAM: Just on a point of clarification, were the leasing arrangements relaxed in that situation to enable the lease to be extended to April and did that come at an additional cost to the government? Were we leasing an additional large air tanker from New South Wales as well?

Ms J.L. HANNS: I will refer that question to the commissioner.

Ms M. Pexton: I am going to refer it to Deputy Commissioner Waters.

Mr C. Waters: We had opportunities to extend the large air tanker contract. The contractor requires seven days' notice to extend. The difficulty comes when they have other contractual arrangements in place with other jurisdictions and countries so that we cannot extend after a certain time. We can also request the national large air tanker, which was the one that we brought across from New South Wales, and we pick up the operating cost for that aircraft as well.

Extract from *Hansard*

[ASSEMBLY ESTIMATES COMMITTEE A — Wednesday, 22 May 2024]

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Dr D.J. HONEY: I was going to suggest, for the sake of all of us, that we take a short comfort break given that we have been in the chamber for almost two hours.

The CHAIR: Parliamentary secretary, we have a question on division 29 and we have four other divisions with an hour and a bit to go.

Dr D.J. HONEY: We have no further questions on this division.

The CHAIR: Then do we want to finish off this section?

Mr P.C. TINLEY: It is entirely in the hands of the opposition, but if we are finished with this division and you want to move on, why do we not take a break at this point?

Dr D.J. HONEY: We are happy for the chair to close this division.

The CHAIR: We will finish the division and have a 10-minute break.

The appropriation was recommended.

Meeting suspended from 8.55 to 9.05 pm