

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON
ESTIMATES AND FINANCIAL OPERATIONS**

2022–23 BUDGET ESTIMATES



**TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE
TAKEN AT PERTH
WEDNESDAY, 22 JUNE 2022**

SESSION FOUR

DEPARTMENT OF FIRE AND EMERGENCY SERVICES

Members

**Hon Peter Collier (Chair)
Hon Samantha Rowe (Deputy Chair)
Hon Jackie Jarvis
Hon Nick Goiran
Hon Dr Brad Pettitt**

Hearing commenced at 3.15 pm

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON

Minister for Emergency Services, examined:

Mr DARREN KLEMM

Fire and Emergency Services Commissioner, examined:

Mr CRAIG WATERS

Deputy Commissioner, Operations, examined:

Ms GEORGINA CAMARDA

Director, Business Services/Chief Finance Officer, examined:

Mrs MELISSA PEXTON

Deputy Commissioner, Strategy and Emergency Management, examined:

Mr MURRAY CARTER

Executive Director, Rural Fire Division, examined:

Mr RICHARD BURNELL

Executive Director, Corporate Services, examined:

Mr MATHEW DIXON

Senior Policy Adviser, Minister for Emergency Services, examined:

Ms JENNI SKYNER

Acting Director, Legal Policy and Compliance, examined:

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Welcome to today's estimates hearings. We acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we are meeting this afternoon and pay our respects to elders past, present and emerging.

Could all witnesses please indicate—a nod of the head will do—that they have read, understood and signed the document titled "Information for Witnesses".

[Witnesses nodded.]

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Thank you. Your testimony before the committee must be complete and truthful to the best of your knowledge. This hearing is being recorded by Hansard and broadcast live on the Parliament's website. The committee will place the uncorrected transcript of your evidence on the internet a few days after the hearing. When the transcript is finalised, the uncorrected

version will be replaced by the finalised version. This is a public hearing, but the committee can elect to hear evidence in private. If for some reason you wish to make a confidential statement, you should request that the evidence be taken in closed session before answering the question. Members, before asking a question, I ask that you provide the relevant page and paragraph number where possible.

Does the minister wish to make a brief opening statement?

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: No, thank you.

Hon JACKIE JARVIS: I refer to spending changes, new initiatives, on page 460 of budget paper No 2. I am interested in the first line item, the aerial bushfire surveillance large air tanker. Page 461 contains some notes about \$11 million being spent on a three-year lease of that large air tanker, which will be based in my electorate at the Busselton Margaret River Airport. How will that enhance Western Australia's firefighting capacity? Does that service a large part of the state or does it service only the south west area? How does it assist in firefighting activities?

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: Thank you for the question. I am very pleased that, as you pointed out, we have \$11 million in the budget over the next four years for a large air tanker to be permanently based as part of WA's aerial firefighting fleet for the first time. Up until now we have relied on a national aircraft, and we were at the whim of the feds and we could not be confident about that and could not rely on having our own here dedicated for Western Australia. That large air tanker will be based at the Busselton Margaret River Airport for approximately three months each year, from December to March, when the state is at its most vulnerable during the high-threat bushfire season. The contract runs for four years. The decision to commit to a dedicated large air tanker for WA really does acknowledge the challenging conditions that the emergency services have experienced in the past two summers in particular. Although the aircraft is based at the Busselton Margaret River Airport, it will be moved around based on need during the fire season. The national LAT that we had here in the fire season this year performed 76 drops that totalled almost one million litres of retardant in summer, and then we had some borrowed LATs from other states. They performed 41 drops that totalled about 460 000 litres of retardant. A large air tanker is only one tool in the arsenal, if I can put it that way, in relation to fighting fires. Obviously we need people on the ground, but certainly this new large air tanker really does help with our aerial fleet. Essentially, we have about 37 different kinds of aircraft available to help fight fires. In February this year when we had the four level 3 incidents at the same time, the large air tanker moved around based on need and in some cases it was on its way to a particular case and had to be moved to go in a different direction, but it did work well. From my perspective, it is an important investment because it helps us fight fires in what is an increasingly challenging space. Climate change is here and we are seeing more and more extreme adverse weather events. Like I say, this is just one tool in the arsenal to help us fight fires.

Hon JACKIE JARVIS: The next item down from that on page 461 is \$12.5 million to establish and fit-out a new aviation and maintenance facility at Jandakot. Did you mention 37 other aircraft, or did I mishear you?

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: I did.

Hon JACKIE JARVIS: Are they based out of that facility?

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: Our state firefighting capacity is 37 aircraft. During those fires we had essentially 37 aircraft on standby. They are based strategically around the state in different places. Some are based at Jandakot and some are based at Serpentine, Bunbury, Busselton—as you would

know, because you visited with me—Manjimup and Albany. They are based strategically to ensure they can service the needs of both the metro area and regional communities.

Hon Dr BRAD PETTITT: I will continue on the climate change issues and refer to quite a strong statement under the significant issues impacting the agency on page 461 —

The challenges posed by a changing climate have continued to result in more frequent and intense bushfires, storms, heatwaves and floods. The extended northern and southern fire seasons have resulted in overlapping seasons which has driven changes to risk management practices, equipment repair and maintenance practices, and incident response coordination.

Can I get a bit of a sense of how climate change has impacted on both the delivery of your frontline services, and also the budget, and how you see that going forward in terms of the budget implications? I ask that because it is not particularly reflected here in terms of budget lines at the moment. Hon Jackie Jarvis highlighted the purchase of the large aircraft, but do you see this as an ongoing substantive budget issue?

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: I cannot comment on future budgets or what may or may not be in future budgets. I can comment on—and I will start with the 2022 season for example where we saw a range of what I would call exceptional weather events. Our senior emergency services had to respond to bushfires, floods, storms and cyclones—many of those at the same time in different places around the state. It might have been a fire in one place, and a flood somewhere else. What we have seen, and what we acknowledge, is that declining average rainfall in the south and increasing average temperatures have meant that there is an overlap of fire seasons in the north and the south of the state. Until a few years ago, we would have distinct weather in one part of the state. We would have a fire season in one part of the state, and we would not have it elsewhere. What we have seen this year is actually that overlapping as mentioned. That has reinforced the need for the department to be poised to respond to disasters and to make sure that we are prepared statewide. We do continue to ensure that emergency services are effectively equipped and trained for all hazards; and that does include bushfire mitigation across the regions. We are upgrading the states firefighting assets and capability and we are strategically placing the assets throughout the state based on assessed risk. We are looking in this regard that we have got access to emergency services levy funding that enables us to fund either appropriate equipment or services as we see fit.

Hon Dr BRAD PETTITT: Can I just ask about one particular element of that? I understand that there is a collaboration with the University of Adelaide and the Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC on the wonderfully named Unified Natural Hazard Risk Mitigation Exploratory Decision; which has the nice acronym of UNHaRMED. Can you provide a bit of an update on where that has got to or has that started yet?

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: I will ask Mr Carter if he can answer that one.

Mr CARTER: It is a collaboration that we are actively involved in across both our agency and, maybe to a lesser degree the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions, as well as some local government involvement in this process. The tertiary institutions made a start pre-COVID and did a fair bit of work on the project. It is around decision support modelling and a pretty strong collaborative interface with community. Of course, COVID struck and that part of it fell over, I guess because of a result of that, and very recently only in the last month or so, there has been workshops held in the great southern and south west, supported by our staff to support the leaders of that to do some community collaboration around how these models might be applied. It sort of paused for a little while, but now it is back on the agenda. Now that we are able to get out and about and interface with the community there is a bit of work going on. I think whilst there has been slow progress, we will start to see some things emerge out of that in the coming six to 12 months.

Hon Dr BRAD PETTITT: I have got one on a different issue, or did the deputy chair want to come back to me?

The DEPUTY CHAIR: We can do one more now.

Hon Dr BRAD PETTITT: So this one is on a different institute. Point three on page 464 budget paper No 2 Volume 2 “Delivery of Frontline Services Before, During and After Incidents”—it is an issue that has arisen around, what I understand, as shortages of key personnel at key fire stations. Vincent and Fremantle will be ones that have come to my attention. As a result, and you can correct me if this is not right, we have been seeing decommissioned fire trucks at those stations—they are being moved out. It is a budget question in the sense of: why are we seeing those fire trucks being decommissioned from Fremantle and Vincent? Is it around staff retention, needing greater budget to do that or is it around maintenance budgets? I think the understanding that I have seen is that there are several key areas that do not have the fire trucks that were meant to be assigned to those key stations.

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: I will ask the commissioner to reply to that one.

Mr KLEMM: It is not a budget issue, it is certainly not a staffing issue; it is some of the skill shortages that we have got with our appliance fire engine technicians that do the servicing and the maintenance on the trucks that is causing an issue for us—which is an issue across many parts of Western Australia particularly as it relates to heavy duty diesel mechanics. We have got a fleet of some 1 700 trucks; a large portion of them get serviced in the metropolitan area our workshops and we are finding it difficult to retain and also attract new mechanics to replace the ones that are getting lost into higher paying jobs in the oil and gas and mining sector. We are managing our trucks appropriately, making sure that we are getting them through for the servicing and those sorts of things that we are doing—bits and pieces that are required at our workshops—but also in some instances using Scania and other sort of industrial workshops to get the work done.

[3.30 pm]

Occasionally, we have breakdowns, as you can imagine, with the number of trucks that we have got where we occasionally have shortages. At the same time, we are doing an extensive build program. We have got some 12 brand-new Scania fire appliances coming off the run starting two months ago through to November this year and then a further 10 on order for delivery in April–May next year. To deal with the issues at Fremantle and Vincent that you referred to, those are the various range of measures that we have got in place to deal with that.

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: If I can just add to that, there has been an issue with the supply chain. Global supply chains remain backlogged. We all buy our fire trucks from the same place, so there has been an issue with key component delivery, whether it is semi-conducted chips or whatever. That is certainly added to it. While we have got funding—I think there is \$140 million—to invest in new appliances, we just have not been able to get them into Australia as quickly as we would appreciate.

Mr KLEMM: I guess by way of example of what the minister referred to is that we are getting, in some instances, brand-new Scania cab chassis delivered here from Europe that are missing componentry on the truck. The trucks are here, but cannot be used because parts have not arrived with the brand-new truck. It is like buying a car without the two front wheels in some cases.

Hon NICK GOIRAN: Minister, if I can ask you to turn to page 460 in the budget papers. You will see there under “Spending Changes” and “New Initiatives” that the second one listed is “Consolidated Emergency Services Acts”, with \$370 000 estimated to be spent this financial year on that. Is that some form of reference to law reform with the consolidating of statutes?

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: Yes, honourable member, you are correct; it is. There are essentially three acts that govern this sector at the moment. The intention is, and has been for a long time, to combine those into a modern piece of legislation.

Hon NICK GOIRAN: It has been intended to do that for some time, you say, but, nevertheless, it has only just found its way into the budget papers as a spending change. That said, are you in a position—potentially, I suspect, this might need to be taken on notice—or willing to table the most recent briefing note that you have received in respect to that new initiative?

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: No. I do not think I can, member. I happy to get you a briefing on it. The briefing notes I have got in relation to it, I do not think I can because of cabinet-in-confidence.

Hon NICK GOIRAN: Can I ask you then just to take it on notice and if it can be provided, obviously that is, shall I daresay, and use the words, “gold standard”. If it cannot be provided, maybe the answer will come back to say a verbal briefing can be provided to the member.

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: I am happy to do that. I certainly am happy to brief you, honourable member.

[Supplementary Information No D1.]

Hon NICK GOIRAN: Thank you, minister.

The cost of your recent overseas travel—is that something that is captured in this agency’s budget?

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: It is not.

Hon NICK GOIRAN: No, all right. That is something for the Department of the Premier and Cabinet, is it not?

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: Any overseas travel by any minister needs to be disclosed to Parliament in a report to Parliament within, I think, from memory, two months of that trip having taken place.

Hon NICK GOIRAN: Yes, but who pays? Who signs off on it in terms of the expenditure?

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: It is not this agency, so it is not for this session.

Hon NICK GOIRAN: In your time as emergency services minister, how many state of emergency declarations have you made?

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: I have extended an existing state of emergency.

Hon NICK GOIRAN: How many times would that have happened?

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: How many times have I done it? I have done it, I understand, on 12 occasions. Eleven times have been since I was sworn in as the Minister for Emergency Services in December last year, and I had done it once previously when I acted as the Minister for Emergency Services in August 2020.

Hon NICK GOIRAN: Okay; excellent. I think it is common knowledge that you were recently overseas. Before you did that, did you brief the acting minister about the state of emergency?

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: My office briefed. I might have had a cursory conversation with the minister, but my office briefed the minister.

Hon NICK GOIRAN: So your office did, but you had some form of conversation with the acting minister?

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: I had a conversation with the acting minister.

Hon NICK GOIRAN: And did that manifest itself in any sort of written documentation provided to the acting minister?

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: Not from me to him. The same process took place, I understand, with the acting minister as takes place with me. The police commissioner in his other role briefed the minister.

Hon NICK GOIRAN: Yes, I can understand that. That is with regard to the declaration that was made while you were away by the acting minister, and we had a good discussion with the police commissioner about that this morning. But a state of emergency is a very serious thing, and you had very urgent business to undertake overseas—official business. Given the serious nature of the state of emergency, I am just trying to ascertain what level of communication was had with the acting minister before he took on this serious responsibility. You have indicated that, it sounds like—I think you might have used the words “cursory conversation” with the minister, but perhaps a more substantial briefing was given by your office. Did that more substantial briefing include any written documentation?

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: No. There was no document. My staff briefed the acting minister. There was no documentation provided. In terms of the extension, the same State Emergency Coordinator provided the briefing that he alluded to earlier in the day.

Hon NICK GOIRAN: You indicated earlier that you had previously acted yourself as emergency services minister, and then had to make a declaration at one point in time. When you were acting, were you also afforded a briefing by either the minister or his ministerial office at the time?

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: I do not recall, honourable member. I certainly recall being briefed by the commissioner at the time. I do not recall what conversation happened. At that stage, it was then Minister Logan. The minister certainly had a conversation with me, but I cannot recall the kind of—so much has happened since August 2020 as you would appreciate.

Hon NICK GOIRAN: Indeed. Would any written documentation have been provided to you to take on that role as acting minister?

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: My recollection is that the same process took place as takes place; that is, I had a verbal briefing at the time from State Emergency Coordinator.

Hon NICK GOIRAN: Sorry—so not in respect of the actual making of a declaration. I appreciate that that process has been the same, but in terms of Minister Logan handing the baton to you, was there any written documentation provided to you at the time?

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: There was not.

Hon NICK GOIRAN: No. I just make the observation that I find it quite remarkable that a state of emergency can be declared by ministers, all lawfully under our laws, and then handed the baton to another minister but there is no written documentation provided to them in such a serious situation.

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: Look, conversations took place at the State Disaster Council and the State Emergency Management Committee of cabinet in relation to this stuff, so decisions are not made in isolation. A great deal of conversation happens across government on this stuff. All ministers would be aware of what is going on regardless of the portfolio they hold.

Hon NICK GOIRAN: Is Minister Buti part of the State Disaster Council?

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: I would have to check.

Hon NICK GOIRAN: Are you a member of the State Disaster Council?

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: I am.

Hon NICK GOIRAN: Okay. So is Minister Buti present with you when you have your meetings?

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: He has been at some meetings. I have to clarify what his membership is—whether he is invited as an observer or, indeed, a participant.

Hon NICK GOIRAN: Is the State Disaster Council administered in anyway by this department, fire and emergency services?

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: No, it is not.

Hon NICK GOIRAN: The department of Premier and cabinet.

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: It is a cabinet standing committee.

Hon NICK GOIRAN: Minister, is the existence of a public health state of emergency, which, I appreciate you do not declare—the health minister does that—but is the existence of that a factor that you take into account when you decide whether to extend the state of emergency or not?

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: No, not necessarily.

Hon NICK GOIRAN: It is irrelevant to your considerations.

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: I am aware of it, but my decisions are made solely on the advice of the State Emergency Coordinator, not in relation to what the Public Health Act is doing.

Hon NICK GOIRAN: In that advice that he gives to you, at no stage does he use the fact that there is a public health state of emergency declaration as a reason why you should extend.

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: I do not recall him using those words, although, as he indicated today in an earlier hearing, he talks through the health issues—the things that are happening in the community—in relation to COVID-19 that convince him that a state of emergency is required under my act, and therefore convince me that it is required.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: I am just going to stop you there, sorry, honourable member. We are going to move on to Hon Martin Aldridge, who is the shadow.

Hon NICK GOIRAN: One final question.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Is it quick?

Hon NICK GOIRAN: Yes, it is. Just with respect to this, then, minister, that advice that he gets, which is written advice from the Chief Health Officer, are you prepared to provide that to this committee?

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: I do not get a copy of the advice that the Chief Health Officer provides to him.

Hon NICK GOIRAN: Thank you.

Hon MARTIN ALDRIDGE: Can I ask the witnesses to turn to pre-estimates question 3 in relation to staff vacancies, and I just want to pick up on the issue that Hon Dr Brad Pettitt was pursuing. In this list it shows a number of occupations: an auto-electrician, some 432 days vacant; mechanical technicians of four, total of 843 days; vacant and radio technical officers, three vacancies, 586 total days vacant. These are the technicians that keep our vehicles roadworthy and our crews safe in the fire and emergency services space. I am just wanting to know from the minister—I mean, I have certainly been in receipt of a number of lectures from members of the Labor Party during members statements in the chamber in which you are currently sitting that there is not a workforce shortage in Australia; it is just a lack of employers being prepared to pay their employees more. I am just wondering if the department has considered paying more to retain these key workers within the portfolio?

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: Yes, they have.

Hon MARTIN ALDRIDGE: What sort of financial benefits have been offered, particularly these three professions—the auto-electricians, the mechanical technicians and the radio technical officers—to attract them and retain them?

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: It is not within the agency's gift, if I can put this way, for an agency just to provide to pay workers more than what is in the award. However, a body of work is being undertaken by government sector labour relations, a unit within the Department of Mines, Industry Regulation and Safety, to work out how we might pay a better rate than what is in the award currently. So, that work is ongoing at the moment.

Hon MARTIN ALDRIDGE: As a short-term measure—I mean, obviously, these are the long-term vacancies—how much of this work has been outsourced as a result of the lack of being able to retain or attract employees?

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: None has been outsourced, however people have been brought into the agency to undertake this work. I am happy to let the commissioner to actually give you a fulsome response in relation to this.

Mr KLEMM: Thanks, minister, and thanks, member. So, there is a number of strategies that DFES has got in place to deal with the situation we have got in front of us, and that relates to ongoing recruitment campaigns, which have been going on for over 18 months now to attract new technicians to our workshops. The shortage is compounded by a number of retirements, so it is not just people leaving for other places, but also people retiring at the end of a very fruitful career.

We have looked at labour hire to bring into people in to do that. We have got a number of apprentices, particularly in the auto-electrician positions where we are engaged with two apprentices in particular who deal with what are quite complex electrical components on our fire trucks. We also utilise Scania, and have done for many years, in relation to some of the more technical aspects of these trucks, which are done through sort of computer analysis and specialist technicians from Scania who obviously are trained through Scania in Europe to deal with some of the more technical components. And then, you know, various scheduling opportunities we have got to make sure that we are getting the trucks where we can back on the road as quickly as possible. So, in addition is the work value assessment work that the minister mentioned; that is about truly assessing the work that is done by our technicians, whether they are mechanics, whether they are auto-electricians, whatever they happen to be, in that group down at our O'Connor workshops.

Hon MARTIN ALDRIDGE: Can I ask the witnesses to turn to budget paper No 3, page 3, and you will see there a table titled "Key Budget Assumptions", and if I could take you to the Perth consumer price index growth for 2022–23, it is estimated by these papers at 2.57 per cent. In that context, why is it that the emergency services levy is growing by 6.6 per cent next year?

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: I will ask Ms Camarda if she can respond to this issue.

Ms CAMARDA: Sure. The emergency services levy, obviously, is one of our major funding sources. The levy is growing by 6.6 per cent this year compared to last year for a number of reasons. It is funding more of our base budget than it did previously. It is a funding mix of consolidated account funding, other revenue sources and the ESL. So, the ESL has increased slightly. Consolidated account funding has decreased. The ESL budget has increased to cover off on more of our base budget that has previously been funded by the consolidated account due to the freeze in the ESL rates in the COVID year when household fees and charges were kept at an acceptable level. So, it is not necessarily that our base budget is increasing when the levy goes up. It is just the levy is funding more of our base budget.

Hon MARTIN ALDRIDGE: I am interested in that answer. You said that it is funding more of our base budget than previously, and you also mentioned that CF funding has decreased. Why is that? Why are we seeing more of the burden being carried by the ESL than perhaps was the case last year?

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: It is fair to say that it fluctuates from year to year, and so it has changed over time. So, a few years ago, I think more was paid for out of consolidated revenue, and then it was changed; more was funded out of ESL. From year to year, it changes based on decisions that are made by government.

Hon MARTIN ALDRIDGE: Are there specific aspects of the agency where specific programs or initiatives or services can be identified that were previously CF funded which are now ESL funded?

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: I will ask Ms Camarda to respond.

Ms CAMARDA: There will be some initiatives that are funded now by the ESL which were previously funded by the consolidated account. A lot of initiatives that this budget round provided to the department are funded from the consolidated account with some ESL. It depends on government policy decision on how to fund the initiatives we put up. And it also does depend on how much government is prepared to raise or lift the household fees and charges, which impacts on the levy. So, the ESL increase in the average residential charge for category 1 was to be limited to five per cent and that gives us a certain amount of ESL revenue when we set it at five per cent. It ended up being just under five per cent of an increase. Then where we are short in our budget, the government tops us up with consolidated account to fund the total base budget.

Hon MARTIN ALDRIDGE: You said that there are some initiatives that are identifiable that were CF funded that are now ESL funded in the coming financial year. Are you in a position to advise what they are?

Ms CAMARDA: I would have to take that on notice.

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: We do not have it today. We will look into providing it. Just if it is a great deal of work, we might have to reconsider, but we will certainly endeavour to provide it.

[Supplementary Information No D2.]

Hon MARTIN ALDRIDGE: Thanks. In terms of the freeze that occurred last year in the COVID context on the ESL, was there a CF contribution to help offset the impact of that on the agency? Is it that CF contribution that is falling away this financial year; therefore, we are seeing a larger ESL increase than perhaps ordinarily would be the case?

[3.50 pm]

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: Yes, you are correct.

Hon MARTIN ALDRIDGE: Thanks. I turn to question 27 of the pre-estimates questions, which relates to the recovery and resilience grants for insured residents following tropical cyclone Seroja. I note that in the information that has been provided, just three grants totalling \$50 000 have been disbursed from this \$45 million program. Is the government satisfied with this sort of progress more than 12 months on from this natural disaster?

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: It is certainly a frustration of mine how this program works and how we pay out money based on spending taking place. I have Deputy Commissioner Mel Pexton here who is full bottle and can provide a more fulsome response.

Mrs PEXTON: Thank you, and thank you, member. As you indicated, there is a \$45 million budget which includes up to \$20 000 for reimbursement to individuals who are insured who either need that money for resilience measures, so that we can try to build back better in some instances, and/or

where they have found themselves underinsured. You are correct in the statement that to date only three applications have been paid, but as you may be aware, we have over 350 applications. Because the notion for this mechanism of funding through the disaster recovery funding arrangements is a reimbursement model, what that means for those applicants who are having fortnightly or monthly contacts with our state recovery team is that we need those works to have been completed in order for them to provide us with that evidence so that we can reimburse them. We know that there are more people who will be reimbursed once the works have been completed. As the minister has indicated, there is a level of frustration for all concerned, which has been compounded, unfortunately, by some of those external forces with regard to worker shortages, insurance claim delays and so on and so forth, which are causing those longer term delays in us getting money out the door.

Hon MARTIN ALDRIDGE: Thank you for that information. The written response also indicates some 209 applications have been confirmed as eligible, pending completion of works. If one assumes that those 209 applications are eligible and they have claimed the full \$20 000, which they may not have done—we will just assume that—we are looking at claims in the order of \$4.2 million. That is significantly less than the \$45 million that is available. Has the department overestimated the number of claims?

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: I will go back to Deputy Commissioner Pexton. It is important to recognise, though, honourable member, that when a cyclone takes place—a tropical cyclone in this regard—a fair bit of estimation has to occur, in this case between the commonwealth and the state, about the likely impacts of the event. It really is essentially a bit of guesswork, but I will ask Deputy Commissioner Pexton to respond.

Mrs PEXTON: Thank you again. The process when we are looking at making a request to the commonwealth is that we use as much information as we have available to us at that point in time. As you can appreciate, we are looking to data such as our rapid damage impact assessment data, and we are looking to our local governments and any assessment or needs-based work that they may have undertaken. In the early stages, particularly in relation to this grant, in terms of those impacted properties, we went with the best case on the information that we had available to us at that time. In our arrangements and request to the commonwealth, because I think we can all agree that the mechanism itself is quite complex, we took the position of utilising the data that we had and, as the minister has indicated, taking that worst case so that we had the money available should those residents require it. We have made that available. We have the money there waiting. We continue to monitor and assess that as we need.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Hon Martin Aldridge, I am just going to move on. If we have got time at the end, we will come back to you. Hon Peter Foster, do you have a question?

Hon PETER FOSTER: Yes, thank you, deputy chair. I just want to start by acknowledging and thanking the commissioner and DFES for all their good work across regional WA, as I live in the regions myself. I want to refer to budget paper No 2, page 465, and dot point 4 under the heading “Explanation of Significant Movements”. Minister, can you please provide an update on the state government’s commitment to extra firefighters in regional WA?

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: Thanks, honourable member. As you would recall, the state government made an election commitment to commit two extra firefighters in regional areas. Last year, the government approved funding for an additional 36 firefighters to be permanently deployed to Albany, Geraldton and Kalgoorlie career fire and rescue stations. The deployment of these firefighters is being completed as quickly as possible and is based on a staged approach. The implementation requires a level of flexibility as the increased staffing is dependent on the

graduation of new recruits through the trainee firefighter schools. At the moment, we are undertaking school number 88 and that is due to graduate on 15 July. A second school for this year will commence on 4 July. Four firefighters have been identified for Albany station and four for Geraldton station, and all of those will commence hopefully next week—certainly by the end of June was the intention. I am told that four firefighters recently transferred to Kalgoorlie from the last two recruit schools and I am told that they are enjoying the location and have extended their tenure. Additionally, four vacant positions will be filled from the current school after graduation. This plan will increase minimum crewing from one station officer and three firefighters to one station officer and five firefighters per shift. This package will put more firefighters on the front line and deliver on our election commitment to strengthen emergency services in our regions. This is rolling out. It is good. We are committed to getting it done as quickly as possible.

Hon LORNA HARPER: Minister, I refer to page 460 under the heading “New Initiatives”. I ask the minister to explain, if he could, the importance of upgrading the Emergency WA platform.

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: Thanks, honourable member. I have to say that members in this place, particularly those in the regions, but it is fair to say not just the regions—those in the peri-urban area and the metro area also—get great use of the Emergency WA platform. The platform has been in operation since 2016 and has become a really important source of fast, authoritative and accurate information during emergencies. It has published about 12 000 alerts and warnings to the WA public, with each of these messages containing important information to help people in affected areas make informed decisions to keep themselves safe. It has a growing importance as the one-stop shop for this kind of critical information, and use in recent years has soared. The greatest use of Emergency WA came during last year’s Wooroloo bushfire, in your electorate, obviously, when more than one million Western Australians accessed the site for information over seven days, which was quite extraordinary. It is not only important for DFES; it is also used by the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions’ Parks and Wildlife Service for bushfire warnings, the Department of Health has used it for possible COVID-19 outbreaks and the Department of Education has also used it for school closures. Some of that has happened around bushfires as well. We have committed \$15.82 million to build the next generation platform, and that hopefully will help our communities make better, faster and earlier decisions during emergencies. That will be done by delivering automatic alerts and warnings, personalised alert notifications and two-way communications. The intention is to provide multilingual warning content. We are actually sending out information that can be understood by CALD communities, for example. Going back to the tool in the tool shed analogy that I used earlier, this is a really important tool that we have at our disposal and we certainly want to modernise it so that we can get more benefit out of it and can help the community.

[4.00 pm]

Hon LORNA HARPER: Thank you, minister. Yes, I was one of the people who did use it. I was evacuated during the Wooroloo fire, so it is a great thing.

Hon DAN CADDY: I refer to page 460, under “New Initiatives”. Minister, you spoke earlier in response to Hon Jackie Jarvis about the large air tanker, and Hon Dr Brad Pettitt was talking about replacing equipment. But I want to get an overall view of the government’s investment in the entire emergency services fleet.

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: I think I mentioned earlier on the investment of \$140 million that the government is making in new appliances that are being rolled out across the state. That does include emergency vehicles like the light tanker, the 4.4 Broadacre general rescue utility and a flood rescue boat. Recently, the commissioner and I have been around the state, particularly down in Esperance

where we handed over the keys to four light tankers. These new appliances are able to carry more water, they are more durable than they have been before, and they have a greater capacity and capability to travel on things like soft sand and coastal terrain. We have provided upgraded vehicles to the Pink Lake bush fire brigade and the Mt Beaumont bush fire brigade. Four new light tankers, as I mentioned, were provided to the Shire of Esperance, and so we continue to roll out these vehicles.

A pleasing element of this rollout is that local brigades are actually engaged as part of not the procurement process, but the selection process of the vehicles. We try to work with the local brigade to work out what vehicle is best suited either to their terrain or to the size of the group. We have had good feedback from the local volunteers. We are totally reliant on volunteers, particularly in the regions, and we want to make sure that they have access to the best quality equipment, and that includes vehicles, so this rollout continues. In saying that, as we answered in relation to Hon Martin Aldridge's question earlier—or somebody's question—there have been challenges in terms of sourcing the vehicles over the last little while, with COVID-19 affecting supply chains. But we continue to roll out these vehicles and they are met with a good response from the brigades who get them.

Hon Dr BRIAN WALKER: I just have a very quick one here; a lot has been asked already. You will be aware, minister, of my interest in rural welfare, having lived and worked in the wheatbelt, and also the ever-present threat of the fires racing through. In fact, our particular area, Kununoppin, was at high risk of being totally obliterated should fire have come through there. Staying to protect your property is a major problem. I refer to volume 2, page 467, and the line item headed "Land and Building Works". I am not sure this refers actually to what I am going to be speaking about, but I would be interested to know if any of the building work has been undertaken, or at least researched, with the aid of hempcrete, which I point out is reputed to be safe from fire and can insulate against temperature, suggesting that if it was researched, it might be an alternative building product for keeping people safe as a last resort when defending their property. I was wondering has anything in this budget line number been done in this direction, or can it be planned to be done?

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: I do not believe so, honourable member. But what was the material again?

Hon Dr BRIAN WALKER: Hempcrete.

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: No; I can safely say I do not believe it has been looked into. I am very happy, outside of this hearing, if you want to provide us with some information, to make sure that the appropriate people at DFES can look into it.

Hon Dr BRIAN WALKER: That is most welcome, minister, because it is reputed to actually keep temperatures at a survivable level, but it has not been adequately researched. I would like very much to put that towards you, because it might save people's lives in the bush.

Hon MARTIN ALDRIDGE: If the witnesses could turn to pre-estimates question 2, it relates to budget paper No 2, page 467, and the line item "VFRS/VFES Upgrade and Replacement Program", which has an estimated total cost of \$22.1 million. I have asked a number of questions around what this money is going to be used for and a breakdown of this funding. The answer the minister has provided to the committee is that this information is cabinet-in-confidence. Surely it cannot be the case that you are not able to tell the estimates committee how it is you are spending \$6.5 million of taxpayers' money next financial year?

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: What I can tell you is that the state government invested \$2.33 million in 2020–21 and \$4.67 million in 2021–22 for the department to undertake shovel-ready volunteer service facility works as part of the recovery plan. The identified projects were to be completed

across these two years and distributed throughout the state, providing local job creation and benefits to regional emergency service volunteer groups. The investment is allowing DFES to expedite urgent essential facility replacements and upgrades to ageing facilities that no longer meet operational requirements and lack basic amenities throughout the state for VFRS brigades and VFES units. Upgrades and improvements include the provision of suitable toilet and change room facilities, provision of suitable decontamination areas for clothing and equipment, breathing apparatus management upgrades, appliance bay modifications, and tunic storage room provision and upgrades. Projects under that recovery plan experienced an initial five-month interruption due to the delayed appointment of Department of Finance project managers. As a result, some of that money was carried forward and re-profiled to outer years.

I will clarify one other point. That information would likely be listed on a strategic asset plan which has been provided to the Expenditure Review Committee of cabinet, so I cannot provide you a list. I will get the commissioner to talk to this. There are a range of regionally located fire stations, including in places like Margaret River, Northampton and Halls Creek, that are being upgraded as part of this program. I cannot give you a list like this. I am happy, honourable member, to provide a briefing, if that is to any benefit, once you are back on deck.

Hon MARTIN ALDRIDGE: Briefings are always welcome, minister, but I think this is something that I am going to ask the committee to examine. I think this answer is not acceptable. For example, we had a three-hour hearing yesterday with Health. They will provide full detail on the infrastructure and the assets they are improving and the scope of their works and the completion dates and the likely commencement dates. To have this sort of information protected by cabinet-in-confidence is not acceptable and certainly is not the standard across government either.

Can I turn now to budget paper No 2 and page 467—the same page. There is a line item there which relates to the local government grant scheme. It is not called that, strangely; it is called something else. When you look at the funding across the forward estimates, it seems to be quite stagnant. Why is it the case that we are not seeing any increase in funding, whether it be operational or capital, flowing to support local government bush fire brigades and SES units?

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: Honourable member, if you could just point out that line item again?

Hon MARTIN ALDRIDGE: Actually, I could probably refer you to my pre-estimates question. It is pre-estimates question 6. It is actually page 471 of the budget, and it is “Local Government Emergency Services Grants”. I am sorry for the incorrect page reference I gave earlier.

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: That is okay. Thank you for clarifying.

This line item refers to the provision of capital and operating grants to local governments to fund Bush Fire Service brigades and State Emergency Service units. As part of the 2021 state budget process, the state government invested \$4 million in 2020–21 and \$4 million in 2021–22 for the department to undertake shovel-ready volunteer services facility works as part of the recovery plan. The purpose of this investment was to allow DFES to expedite, essentially, urgent facility replacements and upgrades—which included water tanks—to ageing facilities that no longer meet operational requirements and lack basic amenities throughout the state for State Emergency Service and Bush Fire Service.

The lower 2020–21 actual of \$24.518 million is mainly due to the recognition of \$9.523 million in inventory held for distribution on the LGGs vehicle program. Amounts are not shown as grants until the appliance is completed and commissioned to local governments. The 2022–23 budget process includes a contribution of 251 000 in 2021–22 from the LGGs scheme grant to fund the Shire of Gingin’s co-located facility.

I am not sure if that does answer your question.

Hon MARTIN ALDRIDGE: Maybe if I ask my next question, it might help clarify where I am going with this. In particular, my interest is in the capital component. I think local governments, generally speaking, are very happy with the standard of their fleets—with some exceptions, of course —

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: You can never keep everybody happy, honourable member.

Hon MARTIN ALDRIDGE: — which has been one of the most significant improvements in my mind with the introduction of the ESL. I think what is lacking is in the capital space, particularly with the introduction of work health and safety obligations on local governments. Many of the facilities that house volunteers in the fire and emergency service sector are really substandard, and there does need to be some significant investment. I am just wondering whether or not you can talk to the issue of whether there has been any growth in the capital portion of the local government grant scheme in recognition of those things?

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: I might ask the commissioner to respond to that one.

Mr KLEMM: The capital component of the LGGs is made up of both vehicles and buildings. As the minister mentioned, there are often carryover issues, and we have spoken before of supply chain issues with cab chassis for many of the truck types—as you would know, member—that we construct and provide through the LGGs to local governments and bush fire brigades around the state. Recently, in relation to buildings, one of the challenges we have had is knowing and, in some cases, local governments knowing the actual state of the various buildings that they have that are used to house bush fire brigades around the state. There are some 500-odd bush fire brigades; not all of those have a building. We have recently put a proposal to the WALGA state council that we would work with local governments and WALGA to do an assessment and get an understanding of exactly what is out there from an asset point of view. For some of those issues I think you are raising—around male and female toilets, changing areas, and some of the work health and safety matters—if we can get an understanding of exactly what is the scope of the work that is going to be required to bring these buildings up to the required standards, we can then look at what the budget requirement is to address the need.

Hon STEPHEN DAWSON: We are out of time, but I just will bring to your attention, honourable member—you did see the attachment that was provided in the answer to that document in relation to operating grant allocations by local government, and the service and the amount?

Hon MARTIN ALDRIDGE: I did. Thank you.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: That draws our hearing to a close. Thank you all for your attendance today.

Members, you may submit your remaining questions through the electronic lodgement system, which will close at 5.00 pm on 1 July 2022.

Witnesses, the committee will forward the uncorrected transcript of evidence, with questions taken on notice highlighted, as soon as possible after the hearing. Responses to questions on notice are due by 5.00 pm on 20 July 2022. Should you be unable to meet the due date, please advise the committee in writing as soon as possible before that due date. The advice is to include specific reasons why the due date cannot be met.

Once again, I thank you all for your attendance.

Hearing concluded at 4.14 pm
