

The committee convened at 8.30 am.

Mr CHAIR: Good morning, everyone. Welcome to today's Estimates Committee hearing.

I acknowledge that we gather this morning on the land of the Larrakia people and pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging.

MINISTER LAWLER'S PORTFOLIOS

TREASURER

DEPARTMENT OF TREASURY AND FINANCE

Mr CHAIR: I welcome you, Treasurer, and invite you to introduce the officials accompanying you before we progress to an opening statement.

Ms LAWLER: Mr Chair, I also acknowledge the Larrakia people on whose land we meet.

I will make an opening statement in relation to my responsibilities. I have with me the Under Treasurer, Craig Graham; Deputy Under Treasurer, Mick Butler; the other Deputy Under Treasurer, Catherine Weber; the Executive Director Finance, Tarrant Moore; and a number of other officials who will come to the table.

Mr CHAIR: Treasurer, I invite you to make a brief opening statement. I will then call for questions relating to that statement. The committee will then consider any whole-of-government budget and fiscal strategy-related questions before moving onto output-specific questions. I will invite the shadow minister to ask their questions first, followed by the committee members. Finally, other participating members may ask questions. The committee has agreed that other members may join in on the line of questioning pursued by the shadow minister, rather than waiting for the end of the shadow's questioning on the output.

Ms LAWLER: As Treasurer, I will address financial and economic matters related to the budget, including financial statements and fiscal strategy, Territory revenue and the Territory economy. Details on specific agency budgetary matters, including infrastructure projects, can be addressed by the ministers responsible for those portfolios.

As shareholding minister I can address budgetary questions relating to the Power and Water Corporation, Territory Generation and Jacana Energy. Operational and other policy questions should be discussed at the government-owned corporations hearing.

In addition to the whole-of-government financial issues, I will answer questions related to the Department of Treasury and Finance as an agency, the Central Holding Authority and the Northern Territory Treasury Corporation.

Furthermore, I will answer any questions in consideration of the Stamp Duty Amendment Bill 2023, which is cognate with the Appropriation (2023–2024) Bill. The Stamp Duty Amendment Bill 2023 provides for the removal of stamp duty on the transfer of chattels, which simplifies the stamp duty legislation and reduces taxes on small businesses.

The 2023–24 Budget invests in the future of Territorians and it is a budget that will deliver for all Territorians. The 2023–24 Budget is a steady and fair budget that looks after all Territorians, no matter where they live and at a time when some Territorians are doing it tough with inflation and interest rate rises. This budget does not add to the pain.

The Territory must no longer rely on one or two big projects and be caught between the boom-and-bust cycles. That is why the 2023–24 Budget is made for a growing Territory that draws its strength from multiple industries in multiple regions.

The 2023–24 Budget invests in industries to unlock the many opportunities across the Territory and diversify our economy to support sustainable long-term growth. The 2023–24 Budget projects a fiscal balance surplus within the forward estimate period in 2026–27 for the first time since the 2016–17 Budget was brought down. This will meet government's key objective of returning the budget to balance, two years ahead of the fiscal strategy panel's 2028–29 target.

The 2023–24 Budget also projects there will be net operating surpluses from 2024–25 onwards. Specifically, the 2023–24 Budget projections include:

- a general government net operating balance deficit of \$200m in 2023–24 and forecast surpluses in every year in the forward estimates
- an estimated non-financial sector fiscal balance deficit of \$1.13bn in 2023–24, which is forecast to halve each subsequent year before returning to a surplus of \$67m in 2026–27
- estimated net debt in the non-financial public sector of \$9.23bn in 2023–24 expected to peak at \$9.98bn in 2025–26 and then forecast to decline each year thereafter.

The 2023–24 Budget reflects the strict fiscal discipline measures put in place by our government, and a \$928m [Editor's note: on 3 July 2023 the department requested this be changed to \$923m] improvement in our GST revenue over the budget cycle to 2025–26 when compared with last year's budget.

The 2023–24 Budget includes \$1.28bn over four years in new policy commitments aimed at delivering core government services and reducing cost-of-living pressures for all Territorians. It also includes additional funding to support the delivery of government's infrastructure program.

The 2023–24 infrastructure program of \$4.07bn represents a record level of planned government investment in the Territory, with a focus on improving core government service delivery and realising the Territory's economic potential. Of the total infrastructure program, around 60% is allocated to new and upgraded infrastructure in remote and regional communities. In 2023–24 total infrastructure payments are forecast to be a record \$2.11bn supporting thousands of jobs across the Territory.

In this year's budget, agencies and government business divisions were asked to review their Budget Paper No 3 key performance indicators—BP3 KPIs—in line with the new Treasurer's Direction: Organisational Performance and Accountability.

The new Treasurer's Direction requires that BP3 KPIs satisfy the SMART principles—specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound—and align with government priorities, agency objectives and statutory responsibilities. The BP3 KPI review has resulted in significant revision to agency performance reporting in comparison to the 2022–23 Budget. It will increase accountability across agencies and support a stronger focus on outcomes as part of a broader performance and accountability reporting framework.

The Territory economy has performed strongly over the past three years despite the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. State final demand, the best measure of onshore economic activity in the Territory, has grown by 18% since December 2019. For 2023–24 it is predicted to grow by a further 2.3%, which is well above the previous forecast, as a result of increased public and private consumption and investment.

The Territory's labour market is also stronger than previously forecast with employment at a record high eclipsing the level seen during the peak of the INPEX construction phase. Employment is estimated to increase by 4.1% in 2022–23, and the unemployment rate is forecast to be lower over the forward period than in last year's budget, reflecting strength in employment.

These forecasts do not factor in the significant portfolio of private sector projects that have not yet reached final investment decision. They do not include the \$2.6bn in infrastructure announced by the Commonwealth Government in the October budget or further projects announced in the Commonwealth's May 2023 budget. They do not include the onshore oil and gas industry with the final hydraulic fracturing report giving the green light to production or the substantial Defence investment announced in the Defence Strategic Review.

These projects and investment opportunities represent a substantial upside to the Territory's economic development. They will contribute to stronger economic growth and employment outcomes and further support the Territory government's target of a \$40bn economy by 2030.

Mr Chair and panel members, we are very happy to take your questions.

Mr CHAIR: There will be questions. I hand over to the shadow minister to lead us in.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: I start by thanking all the Treasury officials here today. I know everyone scrambling around back in the departments spent a very long time preparing all of this information. I only hope your minister can do all your hard work justice.

Minister, please tell me where in the budget paper I would find the payout to Jamie Chalker.

Ms LAWLER: First of all, there would be a confidentiality agreement. That is probably a question for the Police minister, but those sorts of payouts or funding matters would be in the OCPE budget. Those matters are confidential.

Mr CHAIR: I absolutely understand we would like to go down that line of questioning, but this is the opening statement.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: Thank you, Mr Chair, I do not need your commentary. I am asking questions of the minister. She is perfectly capable ...

Ms LAWLER: I am sure you understand the importance of confidentiality agreements around HR matters for public servants. You just acknowledged the public servants in this room. HR matters of public servants should remain confidential.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: I am confused. Is the payout figure confidential or am I going to find it in OCPE if we ask?

Ms LAWLER: No. The payout matter will be confidential. Agencies have budgets, and they manage their HR matters. That would be a matter for the Office of the Commissioner for Public Employment. She managed that matter. Those issues are confidential, and I think we all understand the importance of that.

Mr CHAIR: Questions will be held to the opening statement. You can question anything she spoke about in the opening statement. You will have an opportunity to go through the outputs and ask those questions. It is very early. Let us stick to the opening statement. Are there any questions on the opening statement?

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: Yes. My questions are to the opening statement.

Following on from ...

Mr CHAIR: No. Member for Spillett, this is not a discussion ...

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: Mr Chair, you do not get to decide what was in the opening statement.

Mr CHAIR: She did not raise the commissioner in the opening statement. All I am asking is for you to stick to the opening statement.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: You are incredibly defensive this morning. Did you not have a good sleep, Mr Chair?

Mr CHAIR: No, I had a great sleep. It is very early.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: We have the Treasurer in front of us, who is a senior minister in the Fyles government. She has answered my question. I have a follow-up question.

She has opened the door wide open there, Mr Chair. I think you can calm down.

Mr CHAIR: Keep it to the opening statement.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: Keep drinking your coffee. I will do my job; you do yours.

Mr CHAIR: It is early, and I would hate to give you the first warning. We are not going to play this game.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: Treasurer, you said that OCPE manages it.

Mr CHAIR: All I am asking is keep it to the opening statement.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: It is to the opening statement.

Mr CHAIR: She did not mention anything about the Police Commissioner.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: I will not fight with the Chair of the committee whose job is to sit there and make sure things run smoothly and to time.

Treasurer, you said that OCPE manages that process and the figure will remain confidential. Whose budget does the payout come from?

Ms LAWLER: That would be the Police budget.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: Did Treasury provide additional funding to Police to supplement that money that is now being diverted to the payout?

Ms LAWLER: No.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: Any payout to Jamie Chalker has had a bottom-line impact on the Police budget.

Ms LAWLER: A key thing our government has done through the Langoulant report was to be clear about when we make changes to the budget. That can happen only twice a year, through the May budget process and the midyear budget process. If adjustments or changes are needed to the Police budget because of that payout, it will be dealt with through the midyear budget process. The reason we are in a better budget position is that we have been fiscally responsible and tight with our budget management process.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: At this stage, the payout to Jamie Chalker has had an impact on the Police budget's bottom line?

Ms LAWLER: Yes.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: Is it true that figure is a sum of seven figures?

Ms LAWLER: I have no idea about that. I have had no line of sight on it, as is appropriate.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: What was the cost to government of the legal engagement on the exit of Jamie Chalker?

Ms LAWLER: That is a question for the Police minister or the Minister for Public Employment. I have no line of sight on the matter.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: Would the money spent defending Natasha Fyles and Kate Worden come from either the Police budget or OCPE?

Ms LAWLER: It would be through the Solicitor for the Northern Territory's budget.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: You were the minister sent by the Chief Minister to the Centre for National Resilience to determine what wear and tear looks like to your government. What wear and tear did you see?

Ms LAWLER: That question needs to be asked of me as the Infrastructure minister, not through Treasury.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: Does Treasury not have a line item for wear and tear?

Ms LAWLER: That is a matter for the Infrastructure budget and I am happy to have those conversations during the Infrastructure outputs.

Mr CHAIR: She has not answered the question; she said that she will wait until the output. Would you move on to a different question?

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: I am moving on to a different question. I will get you some earbuds in the break, Mr Chair.

Mr CHAIR: I am listening intently.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: To be clear, is the money spent on the wear and tear at Howard Springs coming from the Infrastructure budget?

Ms LAWLER: Yes.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: That is an impact to the Infrastructure budget's bottom line.

Ms LAWLER: Yes.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: Has Treasury not provided the department of Infrastructure additional funds to supplement the cost of the damage at Howard Springs?

Ms LAWLER: No, it is from the Infrastructure budget. It has a substantial budget that includes repairs and maintenance, capital works and minor new works.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: Infrastructure would not have anticipated millions of dollars in damage at Howard Springs. It would obviously take away from other projects that could have been delivered.

Ms LAWLER: Infrastructure has a substantial budget but often there is a need to access money for such things as repairs from a cyclone, flooding and any natural occurrence. There is often unexpected drawdown on a budget, but the department of Infrastructure has a substantial budget. There is also a Treasurer's Advance if needed at any stage. This cost will be borne through the Infrastructure budget.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: If it costs \$5m to repair Howard Springs, that money will not be available if there is a cyclone at the end of the year?

Ms LAWLER: No, that is not correct. That is a figure you have plucked out of the air. Any infrastructure upgrades, repairs and maintenance—we saw a fire at Taminmin College, for example—is money that the chief executive and their team manages. There is flexibility in any budget when managing billions of dollars of Infrastructure budget.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: You mentioned the Treasurer's Advance. You are the Treasurer and the Infrastructure minister; you can ask yourself for a top-up for your budget because of the cost of wear and tear at Howard Springs.

Ms LAWLER: We have a process in place when there is an infrastructure ask for a Treasurer's Advance. We have not had to ask for a Treasurer's Advance this financial year. That matter goes to the Under Treasurer to make the decision rather than me.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: Could Police not ask for a Treasurer's Advance to pay for the payout to Jamie Chalker?

Ms LAWLER: You cannot just ask for a Treasurer's Advance. The chief financial officer in Police would look at their overall budget. Treasury would not give them a Treasurer's Advance if they have an underspend of millions of dollars. That is what the agency has to manage. An agency usually asks for a Treasurer's Advance when it is in some difficulty and getting close to its bottom line. There are criteria for a Treasurer's Advance. I will pass to the Under Treasurer to give a run-down of when a Treasurer's Advance is considered.

Mr GRAHAM: Yes, there are defined criteria for Treasurer's Advance payments. It is usually to fund emergency costs or costs that are not anticipated or planned for in an agency's budget.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: Would it not be unplanned for Police to have to make a potentially multimillion-dollar payout to Jamie Chalker? That would be an unplanned spend. Our police are stretched to the limits and they are under-resourced as it is, and this budget does not deliver for Police. Would that additional hit not have a massive impact on resourcing on the front line?

Ms LAWLER: That is the work of an agency. You are focusing on one example. Agencies manage HR issues. Part of the role of any agency, government or business is to manage staff. Those things occur in agencies over time. Whatever agency it might be there are matters where people are made redundant or there are performance issues or whatever it is. There are HR issues in all government agencies that are managed by the agencies, and this is but one that you are focusing on.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: The sum of it is presumably so large that it will have an impact on the bottom line, particularly at a time when our police are completely under-resourced and overworked due to the crime crisis. You can imagine that type of figure will have a huge impact on their ability to deliver services on the ground. It would buy a lot of tasers and vehicles or recruit more police. Have there been any Treasurer's Advances this year; and, if there has, why would Police not get one?

Ms LAWLER: I said there were no Treasurer's Advances. The Under Treasurer has given you the criteria for that. There may be a case that Police need a Treasurer's Advance, and it can prepare its case for that. I do not know the figure. You do not know the figure. You are just making up things. We have spent quite a bit of time talking about hypothetical things; I would like to talk about the economy and the budget in the Northern Territory rather than just this one issue.

Mr CHAIR: Let us take it back to the statement, please.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: Yes. We are talking about the budget. Obviously, all these things are taxpayers' dollars. At the end of the day we are here asking the questions because they are the questions Territorians want answered. This is an expenditure of not our money—it is not Treasury's money and it is not your money—it is the community's money. People go to work every single day and work hard to earn and pay back to government so that we can have adequate services delivered. When money is not spent appropriately or is wasted or is spent on other areas, that means priorities are not being delivered to Territorians on the ground, so it is a significant issue to the community.

Whatever that bill is going to be for the wear and tear at Howard Springs it will be taking away from other infrastructure projects or government's ability to manage further crises going forward. Heaven forbid that anything like that happens.

You will not be answering any of the specifics on Howard Springs until Infrastructure. Is that correct?

Ms LAWLER: That is correct. That is the right place to answer those questions. I am the Infrastructure minister, so I am happy to answer those questions.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: What was the total cost of the evacuation of the flood victims? That surely has had a massive impact on the budget.

Ms LAWLER: That is a question for Minister Worden in Territory Families.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: Did all funding in relation to the flood evacuation come from Territory Families?

Ms LAWLER: Yes.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: Would that have an impact on Territory Families' bottom line?

Ms LAWLER: Yes. Leader of the Opposition, I need to emphasise that this is the reality for every government in the world. Every government in the world has to manage natural disasters. We have seen an increase in natural disasters over time.

Even if you were in government, you would still have to be paying these things. People have to be evacuated. Roads have to be repaired after floods. The WA Government is facing a huge bill to build a new bridge over the Fitzroy River. That is the reality. You live in la-la land if you think that governments do not spend money on projects, repairs or issues relating to emergencies. We will probably see more of it. There were fires in New South Wales and the floods. This is the reality of what a government does.

Some of the coordination work for the evacuation has come from the Department of the Chief Minister and Cabinet. The actual evacuation is work through Territory Families, and the repairs are through DIPL's budget.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: I am not giving you credit for controlling natural disasters. I just wanted to make sure that we had the right agencies because, as a government that does everything it can to avoid scrutiny and transparency, we want to make sure we are asking the minister the right questions and that by the time we get to Territory Families, we do not have excuses that it is the wrong agency to ask the question.

Ms LAWLER: You are fortunate because you have the Chief Minister in the second week this time, so you have plenty of time to ask the Chief Minister as well.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: I am not holding out hope for transparency from the Chief Minister. I can assure you of that, Treasurer.

Last week's ABS figures reported economic activity showing that the Territory is again going backwards and that we have some of the worst economic figures in the country. Have you lost control of growing our economy?

Ms LAWLER: Absolutely not. I find it interesting that the Member for Namatjira, who is the shadow Treasurer, is not getting the opportunity to ask questions on Treasury. Member for Namatjira, you need to step up otherwise you will continue to be sidelined.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: You are the one who has to step up with a \$10bn debt, Treasurer. Glasshouses? Stones?

Mr CHAIR: I remind members that there is no debate. Questions are asked and the minister answers.

Ms LAWLER: In my opening statement, I talked about state final demand. Since December 2019 our state final demand has been the best in Australia. It has been 18%, which is good news for the Territory.

State final demand year on year is approximately 2.7%, which aligns with our May budget where we talked about state final demand being 2.5%.

There are good news stories. You were talking about the CommSec report. The CommSec report is a backward-looking report that looks at those 10 years. We have stated in Question Time that it looks at the averages over 10 years. Of course, in that 10-year period, we had INPEX, which was probably the biggest sugar high that the Northern Territory ...

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: Treasurer, I am not talking about CommSec. We know that you hate CommSec and that your government throws every CommSec report in the bin.

Ms LAWLER: Mr Chair, can I just finish my ...

Mr CHAIR: I understand, minister. Member for Spillett, let her answer the question. There is a process.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: You are the Treasurer. Did you forget that on 7 June, Treasury put this out?

Mr CHAIR: We will not yell over each other today. It is early. Let us get the question out and let the minister answer.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: You are the one interrupting.

Mr CHAIR: I am the Chair. It is my ...

Ms LAWLER: Leader of the Opposition, I need to have the opportunity to answer a question in full without you interrupting.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: I am just letting you know that you were wrong. I am not talking about CommSec. I am talking about the March quarter economic brief put out by your department.

Mr CHAIR: Member for Spillett, all I am asking is that you let the minister answer the question that you have asked. We need to keep the questions to the opening statement.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: I am happy for her to answer the question. I will not let her waste time.

Mr CHAIR: Fantastic. I will be the judge of that.

Ms LAWLER: I am allowed to answer ...

Mr CHAIR: Minister, just hold on.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: You will not be. You are the Chair.

Mr CHAIR: I will be the judge of wasting time. That is why I am here.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: I will be the judge of whether she is answering the question.

Mr CHAIR: I am here to chair. You can ask her questions, but just give her a chance to answer them.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: It shows clearly in your own results for the year to March that we have the second weakest result of the jurisdictions.

Mr CHAIR: Is there a question?

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: Yes, my original question.

Ms LAWLER: I will go back to answering that question.

Our employment is at record highs. Our population is at 0.4% in 2022–23. In the budget we talk about a population increase of 1%. We also have the largest record infrastructure budget of any government, which is \$4.07bn.

There are many projects on the cusp that we are seeing early works for. Some of those are driven by government. Last week for Middle Arm we announced 'do not deal' for five companies that are interested in doing the work to move to Middle Arm.

Also in the budget and aligned to the federal budget was AROWS and Manton Dam. There is \$300m for Manton Dam.

The Leader of the Opposition wants to get a short grab about the economy in the Northern Territory. The Under Treasurer could comment further on the economy. Sometimes the Opposition Leader does not believe a Northern Territory Government minister about facts and figures. You have the March quarter figures put out by Treasury, so I will pass to the Under Treasurer to provide a greater response and something that you might listen to.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: I will stop you there. I have the March economic quarter brief, so I can see the giant, red negative column that says the Northern Territory is at 0.4%.

Ms LAWLER: I can pass to the Under Treasurer.

Mr CHAIR: We will go to the Under Treasurer. If you have supplementary questions, Member for Spillett, you might want to ask them of the Treasurer.

Mr GRAHAM: The only comment I could make is that the Territory economy is small. Headline results can be sensitive to changes in trade and investment flow, probably comparatively more so compared with other jurisdictions. We often caution against drawing conclusions from monthly or quarterly results in statistics, particularly for us, given that our economic data is particularly volatile. We often point to the annual or year-on-year results as the basis for commentary on the Territory economy.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: Last week the ABS figures showed that we had the lowest economic activity in the country. We are one of only two jurisdictions going backwards. Have you factored this continual negative growth into your budget predictions?

Ms LAWLER: I go back to what the Under Treasurer said. Figures can be volatile over quarterly periods. Our state final demand year on year was 2.7% and we have factored in our budget 2.5%. You repeated what you asked before, but it is important for us to talk about the things happening in our economy.

There are so many projects on the cusp of coming to fruition.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: You have been saying they are on the cusp for six years. All the major projects on the major project list were there when we lost government in 2016.

Ms LAWLER: Some of those are projects such as Middle Arm and AROWS. For the work that is happening on Middle Arm, we see five at 'do not deal'.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: You do not even have forecasts for revenue from gas.

Ms LAWLER: There are lots of things that are not in the budget. The \$2.6bn of infrastructure from the federal government and our government is not in our budget. The Defence spend, which is about \$3.8bn, is not in the budget papers either. I have a whole list. You can look on page 20.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: That is because it is not guaranteed. There is no allocation of Defence spend from the federal government to the Territory.

Ms LAWLER: You can see the planned proposals that are not in the budget. There are exciting, substantial projects.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: How long can you cling to this idea that there are substantial projects and that your government will be capable of delivering any? You have been in power for six years; all the major projects on the major projects list that was handed to you in 2016 are still there. In fact, one has fallen off because you could not deliver it. None of the mines have made their way onto that major projects list. If you look around the whole Northern Territory, you see that no Territorian can tell you what they have received for \$10bn worth of debt.

You think that you can continue to ignore economic reports that are put out around the country and relied upon by economists and investors and keep pretending we are on the cusp of something when every year for six years, we have heard all about your green shoots. Maybe the gamba grass army has accidentally sprayed your shoots instead of the gamba grass because the economy is in serious trouble. Everyone knows this, seemingly, except you.

Mr CHAIR: Member for Spillett, I remind you of Standing Order 109: Manner and Form of Questions. Was there a question in that or was it a statement?

Ms LAWLER: Let us step through these things you have talked about. First of all, you talked about the debt and say that people do not have anything to show for it. Since we have come to government in 2016 there has been \$8bn of cash go out the door for infrastructure in the Northern Territory. If you are travelling along Garramilla Boulevard, for example, or the roads of the Northern Territory that have new bitumen on them, you will see that. The Opposition Leader has the brand-new Zuccoli Primary School. There has been substantial investment of \$8bn in the Northern Territory during our term of government. That is where some of the debt is. That money was spent during periods of COVID where we had to keep the economy going.

After the INPEX boom—once we got to production phase at INPEX—in 2016, 2017 and 2018 we heard from people in industry about how tough things were for them. That was when we had to put a lot of money into infrastructure to keep the economy going and jobs for Territorians. You saw a lot of projects being developed, and we are continuing to do that to keep our economy going.

In relation to the \$40bn economy—just to remind the Opposition Leader or maybe to enlighten her—Investment Territory is looking at about \$42bn of investment. Renewable energy projects are about \$8bn. A lot of those are going into the area of Middle Arm, but we also know about Sun Cable. There are about \$14bn for hydrogen projects.

There is \$7.9bn for oil and gas. When we look at the economic forecasts, we see that we have not included the royalties or the employment prospects from the onshore oil and gas industry in direct and indirect jobs.

Minerals is \$6.9bn; digital economy is \$35bn; agribusiness is \$650m—you can drive past and see the cotton gin where work is well and truly under way—private sector through Defence is \$270m; tourism-related projects is \$70m; the space industry is \$50m; and a few other projects are about \$850m. They are substantial projects that the Investment Commissioner, Major Projects and Investment NT have been working on.

The Leader of the Opposition talked about green shoots. Absolutely they are green shoots, but businesses need to do their due diligence. They need to get to final investment decision. Until final investment decisions are made and these contracts and agreements are signed with the federal government, they are not included in the budget.

Our government is positive about the economy. Of course, the opposition continues to run down the Territory; that is its modus operandi on that. We are optimistic.

The figure that has come out through DITT about confidence in the Territory was that 72% of Territorians were feeling confidence in the economy. That was the last report undertaken.

Mr MALEY: You just mentioned that ...

Ms LAWLER: Oh, no, give Bill Yan a turn. Come on!

Mr MALEY: You mentioned the renewables at \$8bn. Can you name the top five of those projects?

Ms LAWLER: I could name the top five, but some of those projects are in negotiations. We know about Sun Cable so that would be the first one that I would talk about.

Mr MALEY: You mentioned Sun Cable as a separate item.

Ms LAWLER: No, I did not mention it as a separate item. I said there were renewable energy projects at \$8bn. There is a number, including our own, and including the renewable energy hub. There was \$12m in our budget to develop the renewable energy hub at Weddell. We will do the work on the ground to facilitate that project.

There is strong interest and there will be announcements coming soon about some really interesting projects for renewable energy. Page 21 of the Northern Territory Economy budget paper says there is a potential \$22.2bn of renewable projects in the portfolio, including the Australia–Asia PowerLink project, which is Sun Cable; Tiwi H2 ...

Mr MALEY: What was that figure again?

Ms LAWLER: If you go to page 21 ...

Mr MALEY: No, the figure you mentioned in billions?

Ms LAWLER: There is \$22.2bn of renewable energy projects in the portfolio.

There is demand from Japan, Korea and China for hydrogen and renewable energy throughout Asia. There is the Australia–Asia PowerLink project, which is the Sun Cable project; Tiwi H2; and Desert Bloom Hydrogen.

Mr MALEY: I am not talking about hydrogen; I am just talking about renewables. You mentioned \$8bn and then you mentioned \$22.2bn. Why is there a difference? Why did you say \$8bn and now you are saying \$22bn? It is up to \$22bn. There is the \$12m hub that you mentioned. That is \$12m out of \$8bn. Can you keep naming some projects to get us up to \$22bn worth of renewable projects that will happen in the Northern Territory? Can you give us an estimated time when those projects will start?

Ms LAWLER: Hydrogen ...

Mr MALEY: I am talking about renewables, sorry. Hydrogen is ...

Ms LAWLER: Hydrogen was \$14bn and renewable was \$8bn, so if you combine 14 and 8, you get to that renewable energy figure.

When you talk about hydrogen—I think it is a definition thing—it is a renewable energy source. That is why ...

Mr MALEY: You mentioned \$14bn in hydrogen projects. That will be my next question. I am just going back to the \$8bn in renewables. So far you have named one project at \$12m, which is nowhere near \$8bn. Can you name some more projects that will get us to the \$8bn economy?

Ms LAWLER: Just to clarify, the renewable energy project was \$8bn and hydrogen was \$14bn. In the Northern Territory Economy budget paper, you see that if you add 14 and 8, you get to \$22bn of renewable projects in the portfolio. There is the Australia–Asia PowerLink project, which is Sun Cable. The Sun Cable project on its own is about \$30bn. There is also Tiwi H2 and Desert Bloom Hydrogen. They are three projects, but I know of a number of other projects, which will be announced when the time is right.

I think the Member for Namatjira, who is the opposition spokesman for Treasury ...

Mr MALEY: I am not asking for your opinion. We get to ask the questions.

Ms LAWLER: He is the person I would like to be having a conversation with because I know he understands the budget, whereas you do not.

Mr MALEY: Can we go back to my question, Chair?

Mr CHAIR: Thank you, everyone! Just wait one second, Member for Nelson, we will get to it.

Ms LAWLER: It has been 40 minutes.

Mr CHAIR: I understand. That is the point I was making about the Leader of the Opposition getting back to the opening statement. There will be one follow-on question and then we will hand to the Member for Namatjira.

Mr MALEY: Unfortunately, I do not think you can ask ...

Mr CHAIR: Just wait! I actually can. In the opening statement I said that the first person to ask the question is the shadow minister, and the Leader of the Opposition jumped in and took that from him. We are going to go by procedure, Member for Nelson. I know you just came in and I am happy to give you the question. Then it will go to the Member for Namatjira.

Mr MALEY: We were talking about \$22bn and then you were talking about Sun Cable, which is \$30bn. That is way over \$22bn. I want to go back to the renewable and hydrogen, which is the \$22bn. So far you have named one project at \$12m. What other projects are there that will get us to the \$22bn? Can you name any?

Ms LAWLER: Yes, I just named three of them. I just named H2 on the Tiwi Islands.

Mr MALEY: That gets us to \$12m. How much is that worth?

Mr BOWDEN: Point of order. Sorry, minister.

Mr Chair, I am finding it very difficult to follow the manner and form of questions because the Member for Nelson continues to just talk over the minister.

Mrs LAMBLEY: Pull your head in.

Mr BOWDEN: The Member for Araluen is now interrupting me on a point of order.

Mr CHAIR: Thanks, Member for Johnston. Everyone will cease interjecting while I make a ruling.

I remind everyone that we have a level of decorum in the committee. Standing Order 109 goes to the manner in which we ask questions. They cannot be argumentative; there are no inferences, invitations, insults or hypothetical matters. As I said to the Leader of the Opposition, ask the question and give the minister a chance to respond, and we will go back and forth.

It is way too early to kick anyone out at this point, so can we keep some decorum.

Mr MALEY: The minister mentioned \$22bn, so I will ask the question again.

She mentioned \$8bn in renewables and \$14bn in hydrogen projects. So far, she has given us a \$12m hub and Tiwi H2. She did not give us a figure.

Ms LAWLER: Tiwi H2, Desert Bloom and Australia-Asia PowerLink.

Mr CHAIR: Let the member ask the question.

Mr MALEY: How much money is the Tiwi H2 project?

Ms LAWLER: All those questions, for a start ...

Mr MALEY: You have not answered the question.

Mr CHAIR: Let the minister speak so that she can answer.

Ms LAWLER: Some of these questions you can discuss with Investment NT. Jason Schoolmeester will be appearing with the Chief Minister next Monday, so you can speak to them. Make sure you understand that in the budget papers—they are factual—it states that there is a potential \$22.2bn of renewable projects in the portfolio. I know that you only think of solar in regard to renewables, but hydrogen is also considered a renewable.

There is \$8bn in renewable energy projects and \$14bn in hydrogen projects. Regarding the breakdown, some of those will be announced when those companies—some of them are stock exchange-listed—are ready to make those announcements.

Mr MALEY: Can you name five of those projects?

Mr CHAIR: Member for Nelson, she has answered the question. You can refer that to the Chief Minister when the Major Projects Commissioner is at the table. The budget paper clearly states the number. We will hold off until the Chief Minister is in.

I will hand over to the shadow minister, who was meant to be first to ask questions of the minister.

Mr YAN: You spoke about the \$8bn in cash that you are announcing, and some of it was COVID spend. That COVID spend was not \$8bn; it was probably quite minimal as part of that \$8bn. You mentioned some projects, like Garramilla Boulevard, some roads, the playground at Myilly Point and a shade structure that does not provide any shade on Cavenagh Street, all as part of that \$8bn.

I want to ask about economic development in Central Australia, apart from the roads. You announced the art gallery in 2016 as a \$50m project, but we have seen virtually no movement on that. You have not been able to deliver the ship lift.

I go back to the \$10bn in debt and Territorians want to see something for that. Apart from those couple of things you mentioned—Garramilla Boulevard and some roads—what else do we see from that?

Ms LAWLER: Probably the right time, again, will be in Infrastructure. I can then list every project, if you like, that the \$8bn was spent on.

There is a couple of other things I should mention. There have been substantial changes in the GST. Probably a better place to discuss that is Treasury. When you look at the budget aggregates over time, you see from 2016 to 2021 a huge drop in our GST—a substantial reduction.

There is a number of factors when you talk about our debt. Yes, there was a need to spend money when we were coming out of the INPEX phase. There was also a need to spend money through stimulus throughout COVID. The spend during COVID was substantial. We had the \$100m Home Improvement Scheme, just to name one project. It is all part of that.

You can see a reduction in GST and the work that needed to be done after INPEX to keep the economy going and to keep the population in the Territory. We have \$8bn worth of infrastructure across the Northern Territory to show for it.

In the Infrastructure portfolio, I am happy to spend hours listing all the projects where the money is being spent.

Mr YAN: I am sure the Member for Nelson will ask you later today about all those projects.

I go back to the CommSec State of the States report, which we spoke about earlier. For 18 quarters in a row we have shown that we are the worst-performing economy in the country; is that correct?

Ms LAWLER: CommSec looks backwards; it is not a forecast. Each jurisdiction is assessed on eight key areas: state final demand; retail spend; equipment investment; unemployment; construction work done; population growth; housing finance; and dwelling commencements. We had that sugar hit, that substantial \$40bn spend across the harbour—the biggest infrastructure project in the Southern Hemisphere. That skews the data. The methodology does not identify the best-performing economies but only the most improved relative to their respective 10-year average performance. The NT led on two of the eight indicators, being employment growth and dwelling starts.

Our Treasury economists work with Deloitte to understand the basis of their forecast and provide local information. Treasury knows the projects that are coming and understands the changes in population. Deloitte ranked the NT second overall, behind ACT, for its forecast five-year annual growth from 2022–23 to 2026–27 for state final demand and first for employment growth.

I will hand to the Under Treasurer to add his comments.

Mr GRAHAM: As the Treasurer mentioned, the key issue with CommSec is that it does not compare states against each other; it compares each state against its 10-year average for a range of indicators. Our 10-year average is distorted by INPEX. Until that washes out of the data, we will have that issue.

I will hand to Mick Butler for additional comments.

Mr BUTLER: I cannot add anything to that assessment of the CommSec indicator. As Craig said, it is not a comparison between jurisdictions and does not forecast growth at all; it is completely backwards looking. The Treasurer has worked through our forecasts and Deloitte's as an independent operator that ranks the prospects of the Northern Territory's state final demand growth to be extraordinarily strong.

Mr YAN: The 18 quarters is four-and-a-half years, and we are talking about 10 years from data back, which is measured against forward. You would think that we would see an improvement in four-and-a-half years, but obviously we have not.

Ms LAWLER: Hang on, be careful.

Mr YAN: I have not finished yet. We have spoken about the Deloitte report and the ABS report that measures jurisdictions against each other. The ABS report ranks us as last in the country; the next lowest is Tasmania, and we are double as bad as it. How do you explain that?

Ms LAWLER: The Leader of the Opposition also asked that question. Going back to the CommSec State of the States forecast, we have another five-and-a-half years of these figures to work through and we will then be able to get clear air. We could talk for hours about the economy and have been.

Mr YAN: That is what we are here to talk about.

Ms LAWLER: Yes. In my opening speech I talked about how state final demand, year on year, is 2.7%, how our May budget average was 2.5% and record highs of employment.

The biggest issue about the economy that I am always asked about is: where can I get people? That is the biggest issue businesses in the Territory face. When I go to the hairdresser, they say, 'Do you know any hairdressers? I cannot find a hairdresser'. CDC cannot find bus drivers and taxidriver. It is across the economy. The biggest impact I am seeing in the Territory is people looking for able-bodied people to work. The ability to get employees is holding back some of our businesses.

There have been lots of initiatives by the federal government, but businesses in the Territory have had to go to India or the Philippines. There have been campaigns by the Chamber of Commerce in India and Master Builders going overseas to get workers.

Wage growth in the Territory is in a positive position. Our population is increasing and employment is at a record high. The issue that is being faced by Territorians is lack of staff and being able to get employees. Being able to get bus drivers, truck drivers, hairdressers and hospitality workers is holding back some of our businesses. Every week I have meetings with businesspeople and in every conversation they ask whether we can find them more workers. That is the issue in the economy that we should be talking about.

Mr MALEY: What are you doing to fix that?

Ms LAWLER: That is a question for Minister Kirby. There is a large list of things we are doing that involves substantial work, including more apprentices, more opportunities in TAFE, free places in TAFE and migration. There is lots of work on that, but it is a question for Minister Kirby.

Mrs LAMBLEY: You talk about record highs in the employment rate. You said in your speech that the current employment rate has eclipsed the pre-COVID level; is that correct?

Ms LAWLER: Yes, and the INPEX levels.

Mrs LAMBLEY: And the INPEX levels?

Ms LAWLER: Yes.

Mrs LAMBLEY: Are you now saying that employment levels have eclipsed the level of employment we saw during the last boom in Darwin?

Ms LAWLER: Yes. Employment in the Territory is currently at a record high, with employment growth estimated to increase by 4.1% in 2022–23 and the unemployment rate to decline slightly to an annual average of 3.9%. That is the story across Australia as well. It is a bit of a conundrum.

Where did all these people go during COVID? Migration was halted. A lot of people were able to work from home or start up businesses from home and have not returned to the workforce. You run a small business, so you would hear that a lot of people do not want to work full-time anymore. Even in Education, they want to work only four days a week; they want to work 0.8.

The federal government is doing more work on childcare. How do we make childcare more affordable so that we can get more women into the workforce? How do we get more young people into a trade? How do we get more migrants? That is the issue. If you want a job, you can have a job in the Territory. We need more people.

Mrs LAMBLEY: The employment rate is not about how many people are employed in the Northern Territory, is it? The employment rate is what?

Ms LAWLER: The number of employed people is the highest that it has been; it is a record high, increasing by 4.1%

Mrs LAMBLEY: You will probably need to take this on notice. How many people were employed during the INPEX construction boom?

Ms LAWLER: I probably will have to take that on notice.

Mrs LAMBLEY: How many people are employed now?

Ms LAWLER: Give us a minute to find the figure of how many people are employed now. I think it is about 145,000, from the top of my head. For the figure during the INPEX, we would have to chase that up. We will take that one on notice about figures.

Question on Notice No 2.1

Mr CHAIR: Member for Araluen, please restate the question for the record.

Mrs LAMBLEY: How many people were employed during the height of the INPEX construction boom in the Northern Territory compared with how many people are employed now in the Northern Territory?

Mr CHAIR: Minister, do you accept the question?

Ms LAWLER: I accept the question. I think we have the second part in a bit of paper somewhere and we will find that.

Mr CHAIR: The question asked by the Member for Araluen has been allocated the number 2.1.

Mrs LAMBLEY: I have another question on that. Your government—even going back to the previous Chief Minister; I recall him talking about this many times—seems to be averse to the boom-and-bust economy. I get that. If we have record employment levels in the Northern Territory at the moment, where do we sit in the boom-and-bust cycle? I do not get your thinking and rationality about this apparent aversion to boom and bust.

Ms LAWLER: It is not an aversion. We know that when you have a high, then there is a drop. When you look at the data—we might have some graphs—after INPEX we have not gone back down to the levels of where we were previously. From through the boom, we have dropped, but we are still in a good, solid position.

I talked about this budget as being solid because it is trying to iron out the bumps. You will always have bumps as new projects come in. There will always be bigger projects, but we want bumps to stay high and to continue on, not just to be reliant on the things we have had. Tourism, the pastoral industry and mining will continue to underpin our economy. They provide us with own-source revenue and employ people. You will always have a solid base.

We know there will be projects, but how do we have more long-term projects that will keep us going? If you look at agribusiness, you see the pastoral industry but we are trying to diversify that industry by having the cotton industry, for example. You are trying to keep things continuously high rather than going from highs to lows.

The terminology 'boom and bust' has an implication that we are reliant on one thing, rather than saying we need to have an onshore oil and gas industry, a space industry, a data industry, a renewable industry and a cotton industry. You are trying to have more than just one.

It brings a diverse range of people into the Territory, which is what we want. We need the workers but also businesses coming in.

I understand your point about boom and bust. Of course we will not knock back a huge project, but how do we have others to buffer that. We do not want it to get too low.

Mrs LAMBLEY: The population projections in your budget are pretty ordinary. They are sitting below 1% throughout the forward estimates. Can we grow the economy with population projections that are hideously low?

Ms LAWLER: It is the work of government to grow the population. The impact on growing the population is also the impact on our GST. That is the multiplier effect—you have more people and there is more GST for the Territory. The ask is also having jobs for people.

Mrs LAMBLEY: You just said that we cannot get people to fill the jobs we have. It is a bind, is it not?

Ms LAWLER: Yes, it is a bind. We need a diversity of exciting projects or projects that will bring people to the Territory. In that element we need liveability as well. That is the work government is doing.

We are doing more land releases. We have put a lot of money into land release in the 2021–22 budget that has flowed onto 2022–23 and this budget. We are doing land releases at Holtze, Kilgariff, Parnttali Road in Tennant Creek and in Katherine East.

We need housing at a reasonable price as well. We need housing that a worker can afford so that they can make the decision to move to the Territory, buy a house and stay here. That is one of the key parts of it.

We need a diversity of job opportunities, great schools, sporting clubs and events, which are the things that make people want to stay. We need a range of businesses and industries, which will have a knock-on effect. If we have the onshore oil and gas industry in Tennant Creek, we will need all the work at Middle Arm and people who mend tyres, as well as cafes and restaurants. It is all of that indirect employment as well. The people indirectly employed need to be able to afford rent for units, apartments or houses.

It is all part of the work and balancing that government does. We are very fortunate to have great public servants, including the Infrastructure Commissioner and the Investment Commissioner, who work hard to keep these bits together.

Mrs LAMBLEY: You just mentioned the Infrastructure Commissioner. Who is that?

Ms LAWLER: Louise McCormick.

Mrs LAMBLEY: I thought she was doing something else.

Ms LAWLER: She is acting chief executive of DIPL at the moment.

Mrs LAMBLEY: All the data would indicate that we are sustaining and not growing. The population growth—we have good employment levels but we do not have enough people to fill the jobs. We are just treading water. There are lots of things on the horizon, as there always are. Sun Cable may or may not happen. The art gallery in Alice Springs may or may not happen.

Ms LAWLER: It will happen.

Mrs LAMBLEY: There are a lot of things out there that you are putting a lot of weight on. At the moment, you would have to agree that we are not booming or growing. We are just treading water.

Ms LAWLER: All governments in Australia invested in infrastructure after COVID. We have substantial spends on infrastructure. That is what a government has to do. We have to do the work that facilitates those industries, whether that is roads for the onshore oil and gas industry or the \$1.5bn for Middle Arm that we are working on with the federal government. That is what governments have to do.

After COVID all of the world has seen impacts that we have very little control over. The Russia-Ukraine war has impacted the world economy. China had issues after COVID that impacted the supply chain. It was slow to come out of COVID. You could not get shipping containers due to a shortage. There is a shortage of chips for technology. Supply chain issues have slowed economies across the world.

Every economy put a lot of money in because of COVID. Slush money went through. We saw that with the federal government. That is one of the issues. After that, interest rates and inflation are going up, impacting the economy.

There were lots of people in the Territory who did substantially well during COVID. They did well financially because of things like the Home Improvement Scheme. They have done well because we are spending a lot of money on infrastructure.

People are now experiencing high interest rates; their mortgages are going up. Families are feeling the pressure. I was reading an article about the middle class also feeling the pressure due to interest rates.

As a government we are very much focused on the list of \$40bn worth of projects. The Infrastructure Commissioner is putting in place things that will facilitate those projects so that we can get to that \$40bn economy by 2030. That is the goal.

Answer to Question on Notice No 2.1

Ms LAWLER: The employment figure now is 143,659. For February 2017, which was the previous high, it was 141,292. This is about 2,400 more.

Mrs LAMBLEY: You have to question whether it was a boom or we are booming now.

Ms LAWLER: No. It was a boom.

Mrs LAMBLEY: It all disappeared.

Ms LAWLER: It was employment. That is one of the indicators. Also, the purchasing of equipment is one of the ...

Mrs LAMBLEY: Investments.

Ms LAWLER: Yes. There is significant private investment. A lot of the companies that were working at INPEX were purchasing new equipment and that added to the economic boom. We saw a lot of hire companies coming into town and hire cars. All that money then sloshed through the economy. After INPEX we did drop, but we have not dropped as far as it was prior to INPEX. The economy has not dropped down as far as before that 2012 period.

Mrs LAMBLEY: I recall that INPEX employed around 10,000 people at its height. It was a huge number of Territorians. Where are the jobs now that have absorbed those 10,000 people plus an extra two?

Ms LAWLER: There is a range of places from the Northern Territory Government's perspective. In the service industries we see that. A lot of the numbers in the Northern Territory are in areas like health, police and people in non-government organisations. There is an increase in those areas that provide services.

We continue to have large infrastructure spends in the Northern Territory. The civil contracting area is substantial, whether that is loader operators, grader drivers or putting down bitumen. We have had a large spend. The Northern Territory Art Gallery is going ahead. That is a big build. We have CDU, a couple of big projects in ...

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: Unlike the Alice Springs art gallery ...

Mr CHAIR: Member for Spillett, let the minister finish. We have had a great ...

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: We do not need to hear your commentary. Please continue, minister.

Ms LAWLER: I understand your line of thinking, Member for Araluen. That was a one-off project where there were large numbers employed. I think it was 10,000 or 12,000 directly employed at its height and there were all those indirect employees.

Our figures are positive. A large number of people in the Territory are employed across a range of industries.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: I think what you have not said is that most of those people left. Member for Araluen, that is probably the answer to your question around INPEX workers.

Minister, you have said that ...

Ms LAWLER: I will make a comment on that. It is true those industries have a group of people who travel Australia basically, so they probably went from here to Gladstone or places like that. Whether they are scaffolders, painters or welders, they are a group that travel from WA over to here and they will go on to the next project. That is a fact.

Our population has gone up by 0.4% and it will be going up 1%. The facts show that even though people left, our population is increasing.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: You have blamed COVID for your economic woes and you have blamed China, Ukraine and the weather. You blame everyone other than yourself and your government. Can you not take any responsibility for the state of our economy and the fact that under your watch there is no ability, on the current figures, for you to ever achieve a \$40bn economy?

Ms LAWLER: That is totally incorrect about the \$40bn economy. You obviously left the room at a critical time ...

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: Do you take any responsibility? You can blame China, Ukraine, the weather and COVID all you like, but at the end of the day, you have been in government for six years. There is an enormous responsibility in stewarding the Territory forward and you must take responsibility for our economic situation.

Mr CHAIR: Member for Spillett, when you ask the question, let the minister answer it without interjecting. If you continue to do it, that is disorderly. I would hate to go down that path. Let the minister answer your question.

Ms LAWLER: Member for Spillett, your grandstanding is exactly that—grandstanding. It is frustrating that instead of specifically asking a question, you just grandstand in here.

I talked about the \$40bn economy and I read out a list of projects. I am happy to take responsibility for the Northern Territory economy. I also take responsibility for the portfolios of Education and Infrastructure, Planning and Logistics. The Territory economy is in a good, solid position. If you bothered to read every one of the budget papers, you would get that impression.

The figures coming from the department in regard to confidence in our economy—I think it is about 72%. That is high. I am happy to take responsibility for our economy.

The other good thing is the increase in GST. We should probably talk about that good news story. There has been a \$923m increase in GST in the Northern Territory. That is a great news story. We had years when the GST was low, which made things difficult. Our government and Treasury are conservative with GST figures in the Northern Territory, but our collection pool, the relativities, our population—good news in regard to relativity.

We saw GST figures return to the days of CLP government, when it was considerably higher—46% of total Territory revenue comes from GST. In 2022–23 the total change was about \$401m, and in 2023–24 it will be about \$121m. Those figures are still conservative compared with the federal government. The federal government's figures are about \$1.15bn in GST.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: We will get to GST in good time. Let us focus on the debt. We have predicted net debt hitting \$9.9bn, which will be the first time in the Territory's history. Do you take responsibility for delivering the largest debt the Territory has ever seen?

Ms LAWLER: Yes, I do.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: What do you have to say for a government that is indebting our future generations—our children—with a level of debt for which you have no pathway or plan to get us out of?

Ms LAWLER: That is the work that government has to do at times. It was about the lower GST. The reductions in GST impacted the Northern Territory's bottom line ...

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: You are blaming COVID, weather, China, Ukraine and now GST?

Mr CHAIR: Leader of the Opposition, stop interjecting.

Ms LAWLER: We spent substantial amounts of money on infrastructure. There was \$8bn spent on Territory businesses that kept Territorians in jobs. That means kids going to school; having footy and netball coaches; and Territorians buying houses, cars and boats, and living a great life in the Territory. Eight billion dollars of that debt is accountable to the spend on infrastructure.

I have had these disagreements with the Member for Nelson. You are saying a CLP government would not spend money on infrastructure in the Northern Territory. It is horrific to think that a CLP government—particularly the old CLP government—would not spend money on infrastructure. I hope people are noting that; a CLP government led by Lia Finocchiaro will cut spending to infrastructure. That is what we are hearing today.

We are talking about debt. Of course you need to have debt ...

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: It is interesting, Mr Chair, that you are not pulling up your minister on verballing me and lying in parliament, when I have not said anything.

Ms LAWLER: Governments need debt. We need to have debt if we want infrastructure in the Northern Territory.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: This is lying in parliament. A point of order! The minister is verballing me, alleging I have said things I clearly have not said. Your job as the Chair is to maintain order. You are pretty quick to jump on me when I ruffle your colleague's feathers. I would like that called out for what it is, which is a bald-faced lie in a desperate attempt to cover up the fact she cannot manage the books and debt, grow our economy or tackle crime. She has failed on every key indicator ...

Mr CHAIR: Leader of the Opposition, are you still talking about the standing order?

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: Whenever you want to jump in and do your job, that would be great.

Mr CHAIR: I am happy to jump in. She needs to call you by your title, which is either Leader of the Opposition or Member for Spillett, but no-one called the point of order. I am happy to allow the minister to answer questions and for you to ask them.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: That is not my point of order.

Mr CHAIR: What is your point of order?

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: My point of order is that she is lying in parliament.

Mr CHAIR: Are you claiming that the minister is lying in parliament and misleading? Is that what you are saying—lying?

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: Yes, that is what she just said. The Member for Araluen is nodding her head. Were you not listening?

Mr CHAIR: I am not talking to the Member for Araluen; I am talking to you. I do not believe the minister was lying.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: You do not?

Mr CHAIR: She has made statements on *Hansard*. You are more than welcome to follow that through, but I can tell you that unless the minister wants to say she is lying—I do not believe she believes she is or was lying about what you said.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: She is desperate.

Mr Chair, we will move on ...

Ms LAWLER: Could I answer the question?

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: ... because you are as good as the people around you.

Ms LAWLER: I still have not finished answering the question.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: Unfortunately, you have been raised in a terrible regime.

Mr CHAIR: Hold on a second, minister. Member for Spillett, I am putting you on a warning for disorderly conduct. I am more than happy ...

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: During my point of order.

Mr CHAIR: No, the point of order is finished; I have ruled on it. I am more than happy to let you ask questions and let the minister answer, but you are interjecting, talking over and grandstanding. I will pull the minister up if she does it as well. You are on a warning because I have let this go on for over an hour.

Ms LAWLER: I was moving to projected net debt. Every government in Australia, including the federal government, has a net debt ratio. That is a fact, if you want infrastructure. Our need for infrastructure in the Territory is huge. We are coming from a long way behind in infrastructure.

I was saying that if the CLP does not want debt, how will it do that? Our largest spend is on infrastructure. It would be talking about cuts to infrastructure.

In the 2022–23 Budget our net debt ratio is 112.6%. Do you know that Victoria's is 179.14%, New South Wales is just more than ours at 112.88% and South Australia is 106%? You talk about debt, but every state and Territory in Australia has a debt. Would you be thinking the New South Wales and Victorian economies are in bad shape and in big trouble? New South Wales' net debt is exactly the same as ours, and Victoria's is 179% compared with our 112%.

The places with the small debt are places like WA. We know why WA's is 46%. WA has all the royalties in the mining industry. ACT is 45%—a tiny economy. Tasmania is 65% ...

Mrs LAMBLEY: Who has the smallest economy?

Ms LAWLER: When you look at the states with big land areas like us, you see Victoria is 179%, New South Wales is exactly the same as ours at 112% and South Australia is 106%.

Leader of the Opposition, I know you like to talk about debt because it goes to your narrative. I have not heard a single thing from you about how you would change that if you ever got into government.

From our point of view, we are changing that by diversifying the economy and growing the population. We have done the hard work on our fiscal responsibility through Langouant. You see the results of that. Our position has come forward about two years, so we are well ahead of schedule on the predictions or directions that Langouant wanted us to go in.

Yes, we have spent \$8bn on infrastructure. I hope my infrastructure adviser is listening and starting to print that list for you, Member for Namatjira, because I am looking forward to telling you where that \$8bn has been spent.

There is debt in the Northern Territory. Our debt position is much better than Victoria, better than New South Wales and not far off South Australia.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: If you want to compare our debt with other larger jurisdictions, will you at least have the dignity and honesty to compare their ability to draw revenue and the size of their economy? Those comparators are embarrassing.

Ms LAWLER: We understand that, of course, their populations are larger than ours. It is all relative. Our population and economy are smaller. When you look at that, you see it is a clear indication of what their net debt ratios are. That is the debt they are in and our position as well. You need to have a good look at that because you can see what Victoria is doing to try to bring down that debt.

It is a net debt ratio. It is revenue coming in and what your average is. Our population and economy are smaller, which is a fact.

Mrs LAMBLEY: You told us that Tasmania and the ACT have very low debt-to-revenue ratios because they are small economies.

Ms LAWLER: They have a smaller population.

Mrs LAMBLEY: Our economy and population are the smallest in the country. You have built an argument to say that we are in trouble when compared with the next two smallest jurisdictions in Australia. We are in debt beyond our capability of ...

Ms LAWLER: I was talking about the landmasses; the ACT and Tasmania are very small landmasses compared with the breadth of the Northern Territory. Compare the roads that we have to build and the expense of delivering hospital, medical and education services that we confront in the Territory with the ACT and Tasmania. I was talking about their size.

We also have a different population profile from the ACT and Tasmania. Tasmania's net debt is 65% and the ACT's is 45%. They are very different from the Northern Territory.

We are also a long way behind in infrastructure. That work should have been done during self-government.

Mrs LAMBLEY: What is the current cost of servicing our debt per day?

Ms LAWLER: The interest expenses per day will be \$1.3m in the 2023–24 Budget.

Mrs LAMBLEY: Is that per day?

Ms LAWLER: Yes.

Mrs LAMBLEY: Given that interest rates are increasing, what is the forecast over the forward estimates? How will that change? No doubt it will increase.

Ms LAWLER: One of the good things that Craig Graham, the Under Treasurer, has been able to do is make sure the borrowings were undertaken at times when interest rates were lower. I will pass to the Under Treasurer to respond.

Mr GRAHAM: Were you asking what our interest expense per day is projected to be?

Mrs LAMBLEY: Yes.

Mr GRAHAM: By the out year it is projected to be \$1.651m.

Mrs LAMBLEY: At the moment we are talking about \$360m per year in servicing our debt. That will go up to probably \$400m in the forward estimates. That is a huge amount of money for a tiny jurisdiction with a small population—245,000 people—and with all our problems. How does that impact the ability for government to get out of debt, when we are throwing money away like that?

No-one disputes the fact that governments have to borrow money. We all, as individuals, businesses and governments, have to borrow money, but it is the amount of debt, considering our obvious limitations in the Northern Territory, which is of huge concern to anyone who watches these things, including economists and armchair experts. How do we manage that amount of money being directed into servicing our debt of several billion dollars over the forward estimates?

Ms LAWLER: The net debt ratio shows our serviceability around that.

The fiscal strategy statement in Budget Paper No 2 shows that there will be growth of 9.1% in own-source and untied revenue and Territory-funded expenses will drop by 2.2%.

We have to get more money and own-source revenue into the Territory. Our government is working on this by diversifying our economy and with the onshore oil and gas industry et cetera to bring in more own-source revenue.

Then the Territory-funded expenses need to drop. Page 39 of Budget Paper No 2 details what our own-source revenue and untied revenue will be.

Once we get to a surplus we can pay down debt, which will be after 2026–27. I talked about a fiscal balance of \$67m by 2026–27, so we will then be able to pay down debt. Net debt is estimated to be \$7.7bn by 2031–32 with the net-debt-to-revenue ratio projected to climb to 82% over that period.

Once we get to 2026–27 we will see that own-source and untied revenue be more than our funded expenses; we will then be able to pay down debt. By 2031–32 the estimate is \$7.7bn and our net-debt-to-revenue ratio will drop from 112% to about 82% over that period.

Mr YAN: We are talking about a huge amount of debt at the moment—upwards of \$9.5bn. Just then, in your basic current prediction, you spoke about a surplus of \$67m by 2026–27. Based on that surplus, how long will it take to pay down that net debt figure based on those forward estimates? At \$67m as a surplus it takes 149 years to pay down a \$9.9bn debt.

Ms LAWLER: That is hypothetical. I have given you the projection that by 2031–32 the net debt will drop to \$7.7bn. There are too many variables. We do not know what is going to happen. There are far too many variables. It is hypothetical.

Mr YAN: You are saying that there are so many variables. The variables could go higher or it could go lower. Our debt could increase. What are you basing your assumptions on for the \$67m surplus and our ability to pay back that debt?

Ms LAWLER: We could talk all day on this, but they are all in the budget papers. We have a fiscal strategy and we have a very clear plan on how we manage our budget, which is also in the budget books. It is around increasing population, which is vital, and GST. It is also the work on our own-source revenue.

There are scenarios from the ACIL Allen report about the possibilities of increased own-source revenue through an onshore oil and gas industry. That is what our work is all about. We want to increase our own-source revenue, drive down debt and to make sure Territorians have the infrastructure and liveability they need. That is the work of government; it is what we do every day.

Mr YAN: In your forecasts, how much impact is crime having on the Territory economy? It must have some effect. It is costing us extra for police, repairs and general NTG business. There must be some effect on our Territory economy. What are you doing in the forecast to deal with that?

Ms LAWLER: The issue of crime is complex and has various aspects to it. Alice Springs, your home town, has had an input of \$298m from the federal government—\$48m and another \$250m. That is the other side of the ledger. Both sides of the ledger are impacted by crime, but they are also impacted by daily life. Lots of things have an impact, including floods and fires. On the other side of the economy, more money is coming in from the federal government.

The job as Treasurer is to make sure the social and economic sides of the ledger are balanced. We put in a number of initiatives aimed at investing in the future. There was \$65m over 2022–23 to progress the Aboriginal Justice Agreement initiatives, which are about community courts, community-based sentencing and reducing the number of prisoners on remand. We are putting in money to drive down the issues around prisoner numbers.

There was \$17.3m in 2022–23, \$27.9m in 2023–24 and \$10m per annum ongoing in 2024–25 to support youth justice and out-of-home care demand pressures and to support an enhanced model of care. That is more work regarding young people.

There is \$10m per annum—that was the \$20m that we talked about in the budget—to support the implementation of domestic, family and sexual violence prevention. The largest number of people in our prisons are domestic, family and sexual violence perpetrators.

The work of government is to put money in Corrections. We have put \$15m, then \$30m and then \$20m per annum ongoing for Correctional Services demand and cost pressures. We have put \$7.7m for antisocial behaviour reforms as well.

Government puts money in for the social and economic areas. I have a large infrastructure budget, so a huge amount of money has gone into the economic side and we put money into the social side as well.

On the other side, we also have \$290m coming from the federal government for Central Australia, which will be a large influx of funding. That will bring in allied health professionals, for example. Congress will have money to put in to child psychologists, OTs and speech therapists. It is good for a town like Alice Springs to have more professional people coming in. There is \$40m going to schools in Central Australia. That means more permanent jobs in Central Australia.

Both sides of the ledger are impacted by crime.

Mr YAN: You admitted that there is a large cost to the Territory from crime. You spoke about the \$250m ...

Ms LAWLER: I do not think I have to admit it. I just stated that.

Mr YAN: If you could let me finish, please.

The feds are tipping in \$250m, which is only \$145m and some of it is quarantined. What is the overall cost of crime to the Territory economy? It is also having effects on our population growth.

Ms LAWLER: That figure would be impossible to ascertain because it is so variable. The crime figures go up and down. That is the reality of it. I was just reading about a sergeant who received a public service police medal and he was saying that exactly. Crime goes up and down in the Northern Territory. It always has.

It is the work of government to focus on reducing crime. It is the work that we do every day. There is an impact from crime, antisocial behaviour, children who are unwell, domestic violence and all the things that we see in society, not just in the Northern Territory but across the world.

Good governments balance the social with the economic. They need to look after vulnerable people. That is a reality for all governments that have heart and compassion. They need to look after and spend money on vulnerable people.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: Are you saying that your government has no idea what the cost of crime is to the Northern Territory economy and to the budget?

Mrs LAMBLEY: They will not tell you if they have.

Ms LAWLER: It is a hypothetical because ...

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: It is not. You must know.

Ms LAWLER: ... it is so variable. The crime figures go up and down; they are highly variable. The work we have done in our budget is to balance the economic and social. I just read out the spend for the things we have done to address the social issues that we see in the Northern Territory.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: Can you take it on notice if you do not have it?

Ms LAWLER: It cannot be quantified.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: You cannot quantify the cost of crime?

Ms LAWLER: It cannot be quantified because crime figures go up and down.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: GST and inflation also do.

Ms LAWLER: It involves human behaviour, which is unpredictable. It is unquantifiable.

Page 14 of the Budget and Regional Overview is headed 'A safer Territory'. People who are watching or listening at home can see the money that is being spent by our government in the 2023–24 Budget for preventing domestic, family and sexual violence; investing in frontline public safety resources; and implementing the Aboriginal Justice Agreement. The money that we are spending is all there.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: What about the cost of, for example, damage to government buildings? You do not know that cost.

Ms LAWLER: Each agency will have figures for its infrastructure.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: What about the opportunity cost of crime? We are losing tourism numbers because people are not coming here and people are leaving the Territory because they do not feel safe with their families. What is the opportunity cost to our economy and growing our economy because of the high state of crime?

Ms LAWLER: There are hypotheticals around that. Why are people leaving the Territory? People leave the Territory for a variety of reasons and they have always left the Territory. Our data on population is showing that we are not seeing any more people leave the Territory than we have always seen leave the Territory.

I have lived in the Territory all my life—60 years. I have many friends who now live interstate. People leave the Territory for a number of reasons and they have always left for a number of reasons. Often it is do with having children, young families and being closer to family. At the other end of the scale, it is because elderly parents are becoming unwell and people move interstate to be closer to them.

The population figures show that there are no more people leaving the Territory than we have seen leave the Territory in the past. People leave the Territory. That is the sort of place it is. People come to the Territory for a number of years. Lots of people stay, people fall in love with the place, have families and will stay forever, but there is also a group of people who do not stay in the Territory.

The population figures show that we will have a 1% increase in our population.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: I am just confirming that your government has no idea of the cost of crime to the Northern Territory budget or our economy and has no data on the opportunity cost of crime to future growth.

Ms LAWLER: The information you are seeking is far too variable. Agencies have their spends. I have read out and shown you where you can find information about where the Northern Territory Government is spending money to address issues of antisocial behaviour, prisoner numbers and crime in the Northern Territory. Different agencies have figures about the repairs that they have to undertake.

Some of the figures that you are talking about are figures that we would not have for individuals or individual properties. We do not necessarily have those figures.

Mrs LAMBLEY: The cost of alcohol to the Northern Territory has always been quite clearly defined by your government. For example, the Minister for Alcohol Policy, the Chief Minister, often talks about the cost of alcohol to the Northern Territory. How is it different from crime?

Ms LAWLER: With alcohol, the number of people fronting to hospitals can be quantified. From the number of people admitted to hospital with injuries and those sorts of things, we can ascertain those figures.

Mrs LAMBLEY: It is very similar. The cost of alcohol and the cost of crime are almost the same in lots of respects. You can measure one but you cannot measure the other. I am happy to move on.

Ms LAWLER: We know that crime is diverse and broad. It would be very difficult to quantify that. It is just not quantifiable.

Mrs LAMBLEY: It would be incredibly easy to quantify the impact of crime in a place like Alice Springs where it is not variable at all. We have seen a steady increase for several years now.

I think this is a political statement you are making at the moment. I feel like you have chosen, as a government, not to quantify the impact of crime on the communities of Alice Springs and the Top End because it is very sensitive. Is that correct?

Ms LAWLER: Not at all. We just said that it would be difficult work to undertake, and it is impossible to quantify that. Crime incidents vary. There are so many variables.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: It is no more variable than other economic indicators.

Ms LAWLER: Leader of the Opposition, if you ever get the chance to be Chief Minister, we look forward to you putting out the figures. If you think crime will end the day you become Chief Minister or that alcohol issues in the Territory will stop, we have neither seen nor heard anything from you that will address crime in the Northern Territory. You have no idea; we know that.

If you think you will be able to do this, put it in an election commitment. I look forward to hearing that and being able to ask you, if I am on the other side of the table one day ...

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: We will be, but this is Estimates; it is not a campaign run.

Ms LAWLER: I look forward to one day being able to nail you down and ask, 'What are the figures for crime in the Northern Territory?' It cannot be quantified.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: You write that down and remember it for next year. I want to know why ...

Ms LAWLER: The arrogance of the Leader of the Opposition!

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: ... you said it is variable ...

Ms LAWLER: My goodness! The always arrogant Leader of the Opposition thinks she will be Chief Minister next year. The arrogance of it all!

Mr CHAIR: Minister and Leader of the Opposition! Both of you will cease interjecting. I will remind you of two things: the manner and form of questions under Standing Order 109, and keeping a level of decorum in the Estimates Committee.

Considering it is getting a bit out of hand, I will call morning tea for 10 minutes. I was going to hold off until 10.15 am, but clearly you will keep talking over each other. Everyone will come back at 10.21 am. I implore everyone from the committee and the minister to follow the standing orders on the form of questions and responses.

The committee suspended.

Mr CHAIR: Welcome back, everyone. I look to the shadow Treasurer for any follow-on questions.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: I have one last question on the line of questioning before we went to the break.

Treasurer, you said that crime is so variable that you could not possibly work out what the cost of crime is to our economy and our budget, and the opportunity cost. I want to know why crime is more variable than CPI, interest rates, commodity prices and inflation. How is crime more variable than all the other economic indicators you have to manage?

Ms LAWLER: To be clear, the majority of the Police budget would be spent on crime. Territory Families has a portion of its budget that would be spent on crime, as well as Education.

Are you talking about just the result of when somebody has committed a crime? Are you talking about the prevention of crime or programs that we have in place for a juvenile who has gone off the rails? That is why I said it is so variable. What aspect of crime are you talking about? There is vandalism, damage to individuals' property and damage to government property. They are the variables that would make it almost unquantifiable. Are you talking about the impact on the economy? There seems to be three different things you are jumping between. I acknowledge there is an impact of crime and the cost of crime in the Northern Territory, which is a reality for all governments in Australia and the world.

I read the list. Go back to our papers. There are the new spends in the Budget and Regional Overview on the issues of crime and domestic and family violence. There is an additional \$20m over two years, which is

\$10m more to address the issue of domestic and family violence. The largest number of people in our goals are perpetrators of domestic, family and sexual violence. When you ask for a figure, there are many which are part of that and the spend of Police, but it is variable ...

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: Why can you not work it out? Take it on notice.

Ms LAWLER: No, I will not take it on notice because it is not quantifiable. I said that at the beginning.

Mrs LAMBLEY: I have just searched on my phone, and other jurisdictions are able to measure the cost of crime. New South Wales has mechanisms that measure the cost of crime, but we cannot. Why is that so? Why can other governments do that your government cannot? As I said before the break, is this a decision of your government not to measure the cost of crime?

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: You do not want to measure the cost of crime.

Ms LAWLER: No, there has not been a decision made on that. It is the variable, unquantifiable nature of it.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: There are three things you can measure: the actual impact of crime on the budget; the impact of crime on our economy, for example, the impact that businesses closing down has on employment, payroll tax and other flow-on issues; and the opportunity cost, for example, tourists not coming to the Territory or people not moving to the Territory to take up work. There is a number of indicators your government could use to measure the impact of crime.

It seems clear you are choosing not to, because crime is something that your government does not want to drive down, focus on or care about it. You want to sweep this figure under the rug. Why cannot you take three separate questions on notice on the cost of crime to the Territory?

Ms LAWLER: What you said is incorrect. Every day every minister focuses on the work of reducing crime. I am the Education minister; I will talk further in that portfolio in Estimates on our work to address crime. The Budget and Regional Overview shows the considerable spend of dollars to make a safer Territory. Our government is firmly focused on reducing crime and addressing antisocial behaviour, but it is about balancing the social and economic.

Budget 2023 invests \$1.1bn in public order and safety and a record \$721m in social protection to deliver a range of initiatives to build a safer, fairer and more resilient community. Our government is focused on addressing the issue of crime.

Mr YAN: You said that a lot of this is hypothetical, but state final product is not. One thing to increase that is population. You talked about people leaving the Territory, but this is not about that; it is about attracting people to the Territory. Crime is having a significant effect on attracting people who want to live and work in the Territory. Where are you measuring that? How are you addressing it in this budget?

Ms LAWLER: I will read this out because I have spoken about it. 'A safer Territory' says:

The 2023 Budget invests \$1.1 billion in public order and safety, and a record \$721 million in social protection to deliver a range of initiatives to build safer, fairer and more resilient communities.

That is a lot of money being invested for a safer Territory.

I will go through the list, if you like. I have said it many times, but you were not listening. There is \$20m over two years from 2023–24 to prevent or reduce domestic, family and sexual violence.

We are also investing in frontline public safety and resources. There is \$19m in 2022–23 to construct a police complex in Peppimenarti. There is \$8.1m in addition to the \$3.4m already committed under the Barkly Regional Deal to construct a new police watch house in Tennant Creek. There is a police air wing as well. There is \$3m ongoing to support the wellbeing of Police, Fire and Emergency Services workers and their families.

There is \$7.7m to coordinate and deliver services around Darwin and Palmerston, including private security patrols, additional transit safety officers and security personnel on selected bus routes. There is \$4.8m over three years to support the Office of Central Australian Regional Controller that is doing the work to invest the \$290m we have from the federal government.

For Correctional Services, there is \$95m over four years to strengthen the Corrections budget. There is \$17m in 2022–23 for rapid modular cell accommodation at the Alice Springs Correctional Centre and to design new modular accommodation expansion options for the Darwin Correctional Centre. There is also \$4m to install new separation fencing at the Darwin Correctional Centre.

To reduce prisoner remand numbers, the 2023 Budget continues to support measures to reduce the remand prisoner population, including funding of \$13.9m over four years to continue supported bail accommodation trials in Darwin and Alice Springs.

There is an additional \$12.3m over four years to meet increased demand for justice services. There is \$5m for DPP to clear any backlogs; \$3.8m for NT Legal Aid Commission; \$2m for an additional Local Court judge and support staff; and \$1.5m to support the Parole Board. For youth ...

Mr YAN: Thank you, minister; I do not think we need to go through the whole list again.

Ms LAWLER: That is what I said to you earlier. I gave you the opportunity to read pages 14 and 15.

There is the Aboriginal Justice Agreement as well. There is a substantial spend of \$1.1bn for public order and safety in this budget.

Mr YAN: Can you confirm that your population target is 300,000 by 2030?

Ms LAWLER: Yes. That is a stretch target by 2030. That was in the TERC report where we had the target of a \$40bn economy and a 300,000 population by 2030.

Some of the work you are seeing is for international students. That is a strong focus of our government to grow those population numbers.

Mr YAN: That will then represent an increase of 2.2%. Would that be correct?

Ms LAWLER: Yes, it is correct. At the moment we are looking at a 1% population increase in the forward estimates. That is the reason for the new CDU campus. We are looking at the numbers over the next few years of about 10,000. When you look at the figures I gave about renewables and the onshore oil and gas industry, all that work is very much focused on growing our population.

Mr YAN: To achieve that 2.2% increase means that 20 people have to move permanently to the Territory every day for seven years. Would that be correct?

Ms LAWLER: That sounds correct if you have done the maths on that.

I was at a planning and building ministers' meeting recently. It was interesting that Queensland was saying it is getting something like 1,200 new Queenslanders every week. Our figures we are looking at are very small compared with a place like Queensland.

Mr YAN: You stated earlier that our current population growth is at 0.4%.

Ms LAWLER: It is predicted to be 1% in the forward estimates, yes.

Mr YAN: Even with a predicted increase of 1% in population growth, that is nowhere near what is needed to get to that 300,000 target. Is that 300,000 target a pie-in-the-sky, made-up figure?

Ms LAWLER: No, that was the TERC report. That was an independent report produced through consultation with TERC. Our target is 300,000. You need to have targets to work towards. We will work very hard to get to that figure.

It is the work of government and all our agencies to increase our population. That is about broadening the economy with the work we have talked about today. It is about international students and more migration. Everyone who talks to me says that we need more employees.

What do we need to do? We need more land release, so we are pushing hard. There should be an announcement about Holtze in coming weeks. We need more houses for affordability. We are working with the federal government on the housing accord. All that work is important to ensure we get to that target.

Some of the things the Commonwealth Government is doing include increasing the number of permanent migration visas in 2022–23 from 160,000 to 195,000. There is \$42.2m allocated by the federal government to accelerate visa processing and resolve visa backlog, so we can get more people to Australia and encourage migration from regions around Australia through the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility scheme and the Pacific Engagement Visa.

We know it is a stretch target. We need to grow by a further 30,000 people over the next few years. On average that is about 7,600 per year, and we will work hard to get that.

Mr YAN: Based on the figures you put forward in this budget and the forward estimates, you cannot achieve that figure.

Ms LAWLER: Our population will need to grow by 30,000. That is the work we are doing to get there by 2030. Our population forecasts do not include those major projects.

If we go back to the list of major projects, we see they are not included until they meet FID and we have them ready to go, done and dusted. That list is in the Northern Territory Economy budget paper on page 20. You can see all the planned proposals that are not in the budget ...

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: Your own budget figures show you cannot achieve that target.

Ms LAWLER: ... and that means those population forecasts are not in there for those major projects. With AROWS, for example, we will see at least 1,000 workers in Darwin and the Territory to do that project.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: You are predicting a 1% increase. You need a 2.2% increase in population to achieve your 300,000 target, so by your own figures you cannot achieve your target.

Ms LAWLER: I was just explaining that. We know that is the current projection. Until we have FID and these projects are signed, sealed and delivered, we do not put them in the budget. We do not put the figures in the budget.

We do not have in the budget the \$1.5bn for Middle Arm. That project by itself will see huge numbers of people here for construction. We do not have the figures on the economy or for the population. AROWS, for example, is a federal government project with the Northern Territory Government. It is a low-risk project because we are working with the federal government on the money, along with Middle Arm. Those projects will bring more people—more workers—to the Territory, but they have not been included in the budget. You can see the list of projects that have not been included.

We know that figure of 1% will not get us there at the moment ...

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: You are hanging your hat on a 1.2% increase on projects that do not exist?

Ms LAWLER: ... but that is the work we are doing.

Mr CHAIR: Leader of the Opposition, let her finish and then you can have the call.

Ms LAWLER: We know the 1% will not get us there. That was a TERC stretch target. We are working our hardest to get there, and the work is being done to diversify the economy. There is the list of big projects that are coming to fruition, as well as projects led by government such as AROWS, Middle Arm, the onshore oil and gas industry, Defence—a huge number of people are coming to the Territory for Defence.

Until those are all done and dusted—signed, sealed and delivered—we will not put them in our population forecast. CDU is also talking about at least 10,000 students coming to the Territory in the next few years. All those things add to the population target that we are working hard to achieve.

Mr YAN: You are happy not to include any of these projects in the budget ...

Ms LAWLER: I am happy to; it is a fact.

Mr YAN: ... but you are happy to include what looks to be a fictional population target that you are basing your economic drivers and future economic development on.

Ms LAWLER: You did not listen to me. That figure came from TERC. That was an independent report. The government accepted all those recommendations and all that work. We are working towards that. That figure was not made up by the Northern Territory Government; it came from TERC. It is a figure we are working hard to achieve because we know it will mean more people in the Territory, more housing and more jobs. It will be better for the economy. We will work hard to achieve that.

We will get close to that figure if all these projects come to fruition and if CDU gets its 10,000 students. That is the work of government. It is always working to achieve targets. We know that is a stretch and will be hard work to get to but that is what we are doing.

Let us be clear that was a TERC target.

Mr YAN: There were a lot of ifs there. You accepted the TERC target of 30,000.

Ms LAWLER: What would you do about it? What is your plan to get to that 300,000 population?

Mr YAN: I am asking the questions.

Mr CHAIR: Minister, let him ask the question.

Mr YAN: You are basing your economic development on these population figures. What will happen to our economy and where we will be at if—I say ‘if’ because you have mentioned a lot of ifs—we do not reach those population targets? What happens if a number of those projects do not get off the ground? Where will we be at in terms of our economic development?

Ms LAWLER: That is a hypothetical. Our economy is a good, solid ...

Mr YAN: You were giving me hypotheticals—‘if these things get across the line’.

Ms LAWLER: I will read the planned and proposed ...

Mr CHAIR: I remind everyone on the Estimates Committee of Standing Order 109; you cannot ask hypotheticals. I appreciate that some might not see it that way. Let us try to keep them as far away from a hypothetical as we can.

Ms LAWLER: Those figures—the 1%—are if none of these projects eventuate.

I will read the projects now because I have been giving people the benefit of the doubt. Here is the list of projects that are not in the budget.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: Could you please table it?

Ms LAWLER: The Australia–Asia PowerLink project ...

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: Just table it instead.

Mr CHAIR: Member for Spillett, when she is done, I will ask her to table it.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: We do not want her to read it. It is a waste of time, Mr Chair.

Mr CHAIR: She is allowed to answer the question.

Ms LAWLER: ... Tiwi H-2 project, Ammaroo ammonium phosphate fertiliser project, Petrel gas field project, Nolans rare earths project ...

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: Taking up time.

Mr CHAIR: Member for Spillett, I am the Chair and I am letting her talk.

Ms LAWLER: ... HyperOne fibre network, Mount Todd mine, Mount Peake mine and Tivan processing facility, AROWS, Asia Connect Cable System, lithium cathode battery manufacturing, Mount Bunday gold project, Hawaiki Nui cable, Project Sea Dragon, Jervis base metal project, Singleton horticulture project, Rover mineral field, Winchelsea manganese mine, Merlin diamond project, Albatross G-111 aircraft

manufacturing, Molybdenum project, Aboriginal Land Economic Development Agency agricultural project, Hayes Creek gold/silver/zinc project, Tennant Creek central gold mill, DRW01 data centre, Unite Cable System, Fountain Head gold project, Desert Bloom Hydrogen, Little Mindil Beach Resort, Mitchell Street hotel project and the Darwin Convention Centre Hotel, along with lots of others.

Member for Namatjira, that is how budgets are done. Until things are signed and sealed, the population and the dollars are not included. The classic example is the \$2.6bn from the federal government for Middle Arm and the hubs, which is not in the budget. That will come from the federal government. That just goes to show there will be jobs that flow on from that.

Mr CHAIR: Minister, can you please table the document you have just referred to?

Ms LAWLER: It is the Northern Territory Economy, page 20.

Mrs LAMBLEY: Earlier today you mentioned the Langoulant budget repair report. You pretty much said that your government was endeavouring to implement the report's recommendations.

Recommendation 5.31 was to put a cap on the public service over three years. That is one recommendation that you clearly did not adhere to. What is the current number of FTEs we have in the public service? What was the number of FTEs in March 2019 when the Langoulant report was tabled?

Ms LAWLER: As shown in the figures and the work we are doing to implement Langoulant, we have absolutely adhered to the recommendations.

In annual terms the FTE numbers decreased. From March 2022 to March 2023—we are not going back to 2019 in these Estimates—the FTE numbers decreased by 495 positions or 2.2% to 22,040 in the March quarter. That decrease represents a return to the more usual pre-COVID staffing numbers. We saw larger numbers during COVID for vaccinations and health.

From December 2016 to March 2023 the Northern Territory public sector staffing overall—that was seven years—there was an increase of 6.2%, but in the last 12 months it has decreased by 2.2%.

The executive contract officer—ECO—cap is 537 FTE. For the March quarter that was 42 below the FTE.

Mrs LAMBLEY: Can you give us a total of how many FTEs there were across the public service for that period you just quoted?

Ms LAWLER: From March 2022 to March 2023 there were 22,040.

Mrs LAMBLEY: Can we compare that with March 2019 when Langoulant presented his report with that key recommendation?

Ms LAWLER: We do not have that number at hand, but we can take that one on notice.

Question on Notice No 2.2

Mr CHAIR: Member for Araluen, please state the question for the record.

Mrs LAMBLEY: How many public service full-time equivalent positions were there in March 2019 when the Langoulant budget repair report was tabled?

Mr CHAIR: Minister, do you accept the question?

Ms LAWLER: Yes.

Mr CHAIR: The question asked by the Member for Araluen has been allocated the number 2.2.

Mr YAN: The recent Property Council survey found that 94% of respondents believe that crime was the number one impediment to liveability, which directly impacts population retention and growth. Are you aware of those results and what are you doing to address them?

Ms LAWLER: Yes. I regularly have formal meetings with the Property Council and I read its reports.

I go back to the Budget and Regional Overview budget paper from which I read out what we are doing about the safety of Territorians. In Budget 2023 there is a \$1.1bn investment.

Mr YAN: We are aware of all that, minister.

Ms LAWLER: That is what I am doing—a \$1.1bn investment in public order and safety. You can ask individual ministers, which I am sure you will. I am more than happy to talk about what I am doing in Education. As Treasurer I am investing \$1.1bn in public order and safety.

Mr YAN: Was the Property Council's report factored into your forecasts?

Ms LAWLER: No, it was not.

Mr YAN: Is there any reason why you would not factor that survey into your forecasts?

Ms LAWLER: Our budget process occurs very early. We start around October. The agencies start putting together their budget bids. That work then continues over the Christmas period, so most of our work was well and truly under way before that.

I meet with the Property Council. I have a good understanding of its position. We work with all our stakeholders. All those conversations influence what you factor in and what you focus your budget preparation and design on.

It is always hard work in the Territory to balance the social and economic areas. Under the CLP it went too far one way; you made huge cuts in the social areas. Today we are seeing those repercussions from the cuts to the social side.

I was the Deputy CE in Education when huge cuts were made in the budget. I have learned from that and we are making sure that I balance the social and economic areas in this budget. You can clearly see in the budget papers that is what we have done.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: Speaking of Education, we know that 700 international students are about to land in the Territory and they do not have anywhere to live. You are expecting another 2,906 to be in the Territory this financial year. Do you agree that this target is totally unattainable?

Ms LAWLER: The international student target is the work of CDU; it is a question for Minister Ngaree Ah Kit.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: Is it not part of your International Education and Training Strategy, which has a target of 10,000 students? The budget says that you will get another 2,906 this financial year, when you cannot house 700.

Ms LAWLER: Is your question on housing? I am unsure what you are asking.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: I asked whether that figure is attainable.

Ms LAWLER: That is a focus of CDU. If you asked Vice-Chancellor Scott Bowman, he would tell you that is attainable.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: How is it attainable if they do not have anywhere to live?

Ms LAWLER: That work is under way and they will have places to live. Recently, Scott Bowman has been talking about homestays as an option. We recently approved an eight-storey building in Shepherd Street with 71 accommodation units. The Infrastructure Commissioner, Louise McCormick, is working with CDU and a number of proponents on options for student accommodation. That work has been under way for a number of years.

The other day you had a brilliant idea to change office accommodation into student accommodation. This is already happening. During INPEX, the H hotel, which was previously office accommodation, was turned into apartments, and Baywood Plaza in Palmerston had a floor of office accommodation that has now been turned into bedsit accommodation.

If there are private businesses that have vacant office space, the Infrastructure Commissioner, DIPL or I are happy to meet and talk about options. The Infrastructure Commissioner and the Department of the Chief Minister and Cabinet have had this under way for a number of years.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: Do you not include the predicted student numbers in your population predictions?

Mr BUTLER: Net interstate migration is a positive component of our population growth figures. Up to the year September 2022, net overseas migration probably contributed 1,800 persons. A proportion of that would be international students.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: If you are including the number of international students in your population predictions, you cannot fob this off as being CDU statistics. You are clearly counting on these people to bolster the measly 1% we will grow by, but no work has been done to deliver housing for these people. Will Shepherd Street be built, finished and ready for the 2,906 students to move in before the end of next financial year?

Ms LAWLER: Yes, that work will get under way. CDU has a plan and there are already student accommodation options. It has been working on the homestay option. There is a working group that includes the Infrastructure Commissioner to identify options for student accommodation. It is working in partnership with CDU on that.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: What would be our population figures over the forward estimates if the 10,000 international students were not to come to the Territory? You have factored in that we will have 10,000 by 2025 and over the forward estimates we have measly population growth of 1%. What is the percentage population growth figure over the forward estimates minus the 10,000?

Ms LAWLER: First up, 1% is not measly; it is a solid increase in population.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: It is not 2.2%, which is what you need.

Ms LAWLER: I will pass to the Under Treasurer to add further comment.

Mr GRAHAM: I note that 1% is about our long-term trend growth rate.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: One per cent is certainly not 2.2%, which is what you need to achieve 300,000. We have been through that. I will ask on notice, if you do not have it on hand, what the population percentage for 2024–25, 2025–26 and 2026–27 would be minus 10,000 international students.

Ms LAWLER: It is a hypothetical and the variables are hard to quantify.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: It is not hypothetical; it is quantifiable. I gave you the number.

Ms LAWLER: If the student numbers does not eventuate—that is a good question to ask Minister Ngaree Ah Kit—there is a number of other things. I went through the list of major projects, including Middle Arm.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: I am not talking about that.

Ms LAWLER: It is one or the other; you will not get a black or white answer on that. There will be other options. If the student numbers are lower, there might be other influences.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: That is not true at all. If there is an increase in construction or hospitality, that will be what it is. I am asking very specifically if 10,000 international students do not pull through between 2024 and 2027, what will the population percentage be? You have added those numbers in, so you can clearly take them out. What you are saying makes no sense. You have literally counted them in to get the figure you have on page 29 of Budget Paper No 2. All I am asking you to do is minus.

Ms LAWLER: I will pass to Michael Butler, the Deputy Under Treasurer.

Mr BUTLER: This comes down to the point we make when doing our population and other economic forecasts about the difference between targets and data that we use to inform those population forecasts. The 10,000 student target is a target; we do not use that number directly to influence our population forecasts. We forecast net overseas migration based on ABS data, migration sources and that type of leading information. We could subtract 10,000 off the number, but it would not be an accurate representation of what the effect on migration might be.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: Going to that point, if 10,000 is just a target—presumably quite arbitrary—because it is not solid and you have not factored it into your population figures, what is the number of international students you have factored into those figures?

Ms LAWLER: I will take that on notice. Those conversations would be useful to have with the Minister for International Education, because she can go through those details.

Question on Notice No 2.3

Mr CHAIR: Opposition Leader, please restate the question for the record.

Mrs FINOCCHIARO: Please provide the population growth percentage, just like table 3.1 on page 29 of Budget Paper No 2, for the forward estimates being 2024–25, 2025–26 and 2026–27 if Treasury were to minus the number of international students it has determined will be included in its population statistics.

Mr CHAIR: Minister, do you accept the question?

Ms LAWLER: Yes.

Mr CHAIR: The question asked by the Opposition Leader has been allocated the number 2.3.

Mrs LAMBLEY: How many overseas students are there currently in the Northern Territory?

Ms LAWLER: You would have to ask Minister Ah Kit.

Mr CHAIR: Anything relating to International Education is best for the minister.

Mr YAN: What current dollar figure is the Northern Territory Government relying on coming from those international students?

Ms LAWLER: I am not sure what you are asking.

Mr YAN: In the budget we are relying on a dollar figure coming into the Northern Territory from international students. Do you have that dollar figure?

Ms LAWLER: When you have international students, the boost to the economy is around their spend. You are talking about the boost to the economy rather than the dollar figure.

Mr YAN: There have to be predictors.

Ms LAWLER: They will bring family members to visit them and those sorts of things.

I will pass to the Under Treasurer.

Mr GRAHAM: When we are framing a forecast, we look at it from a whole-of-economy perspective; we do not break household consumption forecast into individual segments of the community or population. That would be included in the overall forecast of consumption.

Mrs LAMBLEY: I have a question pertaining to the budget, but we have not moved on from the opening statement. Can I ask it now?

Mr CHAIR: Just one more, then we are moving onto outputs.

Mrs LAMBLEY: As a part of the revenue statement, I note that Power and Water Corporation will have an increase in revenue by over \$30m next year. It is in Budget Paper No 3, page 116. Taxation revenue from Power and Water Corporation is forecast to increase by \$30m in 2023–24. That is four times what it was last year. The note next to it says:

The increase is mainly due to an expected improvement in profitability, combined with tax obligations associated with significant capital grant funding for major projects.

Why do you expect Power and Water Corporation to improve its profitability next year by four times its current value?

Ms LAWLER: I will leave that for the GOC scrutiny committee, which will be on Thursday week.

Mrs LAMBLEY: Do you not have an answer for that, generally speaking? Do you not know?

Ms LAWLER: We could say a few things, but it is probably better for the GOCs.

Mr GRAHAM: The information we have from its SCI is that it is based on increased projections of revenue from the networks business, which will come out of its determination that it will submit to the Australian Energy Regulator.

Mrs LAMBLEY: This is probably a question for it. Does this \$30m mean an increase in power and water tariffs?

Mr GRAHAM: It will come down to the determination of the regulator about how much it can charge for the use of its networks.

Ms LAWLER: One of our largest budget announcements was that there is a \$71.7m increase in the community service obligation to keep power increases to 2.7% rather than what we are seeing in the rest of Australia. On the east coast in places there are 18% to 20% increases in power. We have put a lot more money into the CSO.

Mrs LAMBLEY: However, this is a major increase in its revenue through charging Territorians more for power and water.

Mr CHAIR: To clarify, government is covering that increased cost through the CSO. Is that what you are saying?

Mr GRAHAM: No, this would be revenue from customers.

Mr CHAIR: Understood from Power and Water, but the government is offsetting the power prices so that there is no impact on Territorians other than the 2.1% increase.

Mr GRAHAM: For households and small businesses.

Mr CHAIR: Correct.

Mr YAN: I argue the point that there is no impact on Territorians. If they are being charged an extra 2.7% for power and being subsidised by government by 2.7%, the money has to come from somewhere and it comes from the government coffers, which is Territorians' money.

Mrs LAMBLEY: The money does not come from thin air.

Mr CHAIR: The Territorian is not paying it out of their household bill.

Mrs LAMBLEY: I do not think we need to debate it as the committee.

Ms LAWLER: We will leave it. The details can be provided by the GOCs.

Mr CHAIR: This concludes consideration of the opening statement.

Agency-Related Whole-of-Government Questions on Budget and Fiscal Strategy

Mr CHAIR: Are there any question related to the whole of government and fiscal strategy? You have answered them all. That concludes consideration of agency-related whole-of-government questions on budget and fiscal strategy. We will now move on to the outputs.

OUTPUT GROUP 1.0 – FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT

Output 1.1 – Financial Management

No questions.

OUTPUT GROUP 2.0 – ECONOMIC
Output 2.1 – Economic Services

Mr CHAIR: The committee will now consider Output Group 2.0, Economic, Output 2.1, Economic Services. Are there any questions?

Mr YAN: The GSP of the Territory is decreasing, is it not? We have shrunk by 5.1% this year.

Ms LAWLER: That one is very easy to explain. At INPEX LNG, there was a substantial shutdown in the second half of 2022, which meant less export. That is why there was a drop. When you have a small economy, you see things like that. It was a major shutdown whereby they did a substantial service at INPEX LNG.

I will pass to Deputy Under Treasurer Michael Butler so that he can elaborate.

Mr BUTLER: That is an estimate for 2022–23; it is not the actual because the year has not finished. Our estimate for gross state product is a reduction of –5.1%. As the Treasurer indicated, it is an LNG export story. The Territory is a small, open economy. Exports are a large part of what can move the dial on GSP.

Along with the shutdown of the Ichthys LNG plant in the second half of 2022, we have also seen lower than expected exports through Darwin LNG as the Bayu-Undan field has been depleting. We had factored into our forecasts a reduction in exports, but they were nonetheless lower than we had forecast. Those LNG exports are expected to remain weak until Darwin LNG transitions across to production from the Barossa field.

Mr YAN: GSP is forecast to increase next year by 2.7%. What is that estimate predicted on?

Ms LAWLER: As we explained, it was a temporary shutdown. They bring in all the workers for repainting, sandblasting, cleaning up and all the work that needs to be done. That has now finished, so we move back to our normal exports.

Mr BUTLER: The growth in GSP in 2023–24, which is forecast to be 2.7%, is underpinned by strong public investment by the Northern Territory Government and the Australian Government through its Defence spend and other investments, as well as private investment and some moderating level of household consumption growth.

Mr MALEY: You mentioned waiting on Barossa; when do you think that will come online?

Ms LAWLER: I will pass to the Deputy Under Treasurer.

Mr BUTLER: With our forecasts, we assume production from the Barossa field in 2025.

Mr YAN: Why does your budget hinge specifically on GSP and not take into account state final demand?

Ms LAWLER: We measure both. I am not sure what your question refers to. Gross state product is estimated to decrease by 5.1%. That is in the budget papers and you can see very clearly where it moves across. It is forecast to recover over time. We also measure state final demand, which is estimated to increase by 2.5% in 2022–23 and by 2.3% in 2023–24. All of those are in the budget books.

Mr YAN: GSP is disproportionately impacted by commodity prices, as we have spoken about. If commodity prices softened, that would mean a decrease in GSP.

Ms LAWLER: I will pass to the Deputy Under Treasurer.

That is something we have happening with onshore oil and gas. There are lots of positive things on the horizon. We talk about hydrogen—the Member for Nelson’s favourite topic—and there are lots of opportunities in the future, as well as for onshore oil and gas. There are lots of opportunities to see an increase in GSP.

Mr BUTLER: Exports are impacted by volumes and prices of goods being exported. LNG is the story in terms of the 2022–23 outcome, but obviously mineral production is part of those export numbers. It is contingent upon both volumes and the prices of those being exported.

A fall in commodity prices would reduce our forecast for growth in GSP, but I would not say that it would necessarily result in it going backwards.

Mr YAN: We hope Barossa goes ahead, but what impact would the failure of the Barossa project getting off the ground and its progress have on our forward estimates for GSP?

Mr BUTLER: That is scenario modelling, which we do not normally do, but it being such an important part of private investment from the Darwin LNG plant and the export story we have had a look at it.

It would likely reduce SFD growth in 2023–24 and 2024–25 from the levels we forecast to a more flat—around zero, possibly minor negative—SFD. With that lower base of growth we would see a return to growth in the out years, as opposed to the tailing off we would otherwise have seen from the spend in private investment.

The real impact would be in the GSP story, obviously because we have predicated on the Barossa production coming in from 2025 and those exports being in place. Without those exports, if the whole project was not going ahead, it would reduce GSP particularly from 2025 onwards.

Mr YAN: Would it be safe to say that we are relying on Barossa getting off the ground to make sure that our SFD and GSP continue to grow or not reduce in future estimates?

Ms LAWLER: Yes, they are part of the equation. We have spent a lot of time today talking about the \$40bn economy and the opportunity to diversify our economy. Hydrogen, the onshore oil and gas industry, renewables—all those things are part of that equation. The delays to Barossa—the work that it needs to do with its legal and regulatory issues need to be resolved. We all see the ads in the newspaper. We see the work that Santos is doing, but from the government’s point of view, it is a matter of making sure we work around all the other industries and proponents to make sure that they come to the Territory, too.

Mr MALEY: Does your government support the Barossa project?

Ms LAWLER: Yes, we support the project.

Mr YAN: You said that you used the Deloitte reports that come out quarterly. Deloitte forecast the Territory to have the weakest economic growth of any Australian jurisdiction this year and to be next to bottom with growth rates of just 1.6%. Do you agree with this assessment?

Ms LAWLER: I think we have talked about this today. The budget we delivered is a good, solid budget, but so many projects and investments are not in it, whether they are things the Northern Territory Government and the federal government can control, like \$2.6bn of infrastructure in Middle Arm and the logistic hubs. We also have Adelaide River Off-Stream Water Storage, which is another couple-of-billion-dollar project. Those big projects are not in the budget. The renewables projects I listed previously and the \$3.8bn Defence spend are not in our budget.

We are optimistic and positive about our budget position. There have been some tough times. We had tough times through INPEX and during COVID. That was tough for everybody around the world; it was unpredictable. We are now in a better position. It is a good, solid budget we have delivered this year. We are looking optimistically to the future in relation to the work being done through TERC, government and our Investment Commissioner.

Some of those projects are interesting. Look at the space industry and data centres; they are different projects that we have not seen in the past. It is not just about mining or onshore oil and gas. It is about agribusiness and diversifying the economy. That is our focus as a government. Our public servants have served us extremely well. I am grateful for the work they have done to chase and nail down innovative projects for the Territory.

Mr YAN: You spoke about tough times. I will step back to the Barossa project. If it does not get off the ground—seeing how it is key to our economic development—would that cause the Northern Territory to go into an economic recession?

Ms LAWLER: That is a hypothetical.

Mr YAN: I do not know whether it is hypothetical. We are hinging on Barossa, so if it does not get off the ground, what will that do to us? Will we end up in a recession?

Ms LAWLER: I have explained that there is a number of other big projects we are working on that are close to being delivered and examples include Middle Arm. There are things we can control as a government and a lot of other private investment.

I will look to Under Treasurer Craig Graham to add something, because you do not seem to believe me.

Mr GRAHAM: A project the size of Barossa has a significant impact on our forecasts. They are forecasts, though. As the Treasurer said, it assumes that none of the other projects in the pipeline get up. If Barossa did not go ahead but some of the other projects did, the forecast would look different. We are trying to predict the future, and that is difficult.

Mr CHAIR: That concludes consideration of Output 2.1.

Output 2.2 – Payments on Behalf of Government

Mr CHAIR: The committee will now consider Output 2.2, Payments on Behalf of Government. Are there any questions?

Mr YAN: Payments on behalf of government have increased by \$24m from the revised 2022–23 figure. Does this reflect the increase in the community service obligation, and is that the total estimated increase to the community service obligation?

Ms LAWLER: I will pass to Tarrant Moore, the Executive Director of Finance.

Mr MOORE: As you can see on page 103 of Budget Paper No 3, there is the difference in the budget highlights table. You can see the increase in the utilities payments and the national Energy Bill Relief program, which is the dominant reason for the variation. That is also explained in the table under the footnotes.

Mr YAN: What advertising did you pay for to promote your NT budget prior to delivering it this year?

Ms LAWLER: I will pass to Catherine Weber, Deputy Under Treasurer for Finance and Corporate. We probably did not do a lot. Treasury is careful around its spend, I can assure you.

Mr YAN: I sincerely hope so.

Ms LAWLER: They are good people.

Ms WEBER: We are only just receiving the accounts for the cost of our budget production, advertising and so on—we are paying them before the end of the financial year—so I do not have the exact numbers. I have numbers to the end of March that relate to annual reports, recruitment advertising and so on, but I do not have radio and television advertising. Was that your question?

Mr YAN: It was. How much did this advertising cost Territorians?

Ms WEBER: I can give you figures until the end of March. We spent \$7,130 on document production. We spent \$19,309 on advertising, which includes recruitment for boards and staff.

Ms LAWLER: That is not for the budget; it is for their whole financial year. That \$19,000 was the work they do all year, and \$7,000 was for the production of these documents.

Mr YAN: Do we not have a cost at this point for advertising either prior to the release of the budget or post-release of the budget?

Ms WEBER: Advertising to the end of March was \$19,309, but it does not include any of the budget advertising.

Mr YAN: No, the budget advertising would have been done in April/May.

Ms WEBER: Yes, correct.

Mr YAN: Am I able to take that on notice, minister, if the figures are coming through now?

Ms LAWLER: Yes.

Question on Notice No 2.4

Mr CHAIR: Member for Namatjira, please restate the question for the record.

Mr YAN: How much did the advertising cost for the budget leading into the budget release and post-budget release?

Mr CHAIR: Minister, do you accept the question?

Ms LAWLER: Yes, I do.

Mr CHAIR: The question asked by the Member for Namatjira has been allocated the number 2.4.

Mr CHAIR: That concludes consideration of Output 2.2 and Output Group 2.0.

OUTPUT GROUP 3.0 – TERRITORY REVENUE

Output 3.1 – Territory Revenue

Mr CHAIR: I now call for questions on Output Group 3.0, Territory Revenue, Output 3.1, Territory Revenue.

Mr YAN: Mining royalties are predicted to decrease by about \$100m per year over the forward estimates. Can you please explain what is driving this drastic decrease in royalties?

Ms LAWLER: There is a couple of things. First of all, in the next financial year the royalties will go up by about \$22m, from memory. A number of mines are coming towards end of life in the Northern Territory. That is the reality of mining; it does not go on forever.

That said, some great projects are coming online. The Core Lithium Finnis project is growing to great strength, from open-cut to underground. We will see an increase in royalties through Core Lithium. Tanami mine is going to stage two, which is about a \$2bn build. We will see an increase that way, as well as the work in the onshore oil and gas industry.

As we have always said, until something gets to FID and is signed, sealed and delivered, basically, it is not included in the budget. That drop-off in royalties is because some of the mines that we have coming to the end—bauxite mining at Nhulunbuy has been long term and manganese at Groote Eylandt.

The other one I should add when we are talking about mining is the Anindilyakwa Advancement Aboriginal Corporation manganese mine that work has started on, on Winchelsea Island. That is another one that will replace some of the loss of royalties for manganese on Groote Eylandt.

Some mines are coming towards the end of their life; that is a reality. There are options and some are well and truly under way. We can see that with Core Lithium, Tanami, Winchelsea and onshore oil and gas there are opportunities for increased royalties. Once we get to their FID and they are up and running, that is when those figures will be included in our predictions.

I will pass to Mick Butler.

Mr BUTLER: I do not have a lot to add, just to emphasise that our forecast for mineral royalties does not contain projects that have not reached FID or do not have production licences in the case of onshore gas.

Yes, the reduction over the end of the forward estimates reflects reduced production from some of the larger mines that have been significant contributors, but does not include any upside from mines yet to reach FID.

Mr MALEY: When do you think that revenue will increase?

Ms LAWLER: I just answered that. Core Lithium's mine is under way and the expansion work at Tanami is under way.

Mr MALEY: No, the question was about the \$100m reduction over the forward estimates. When do you think that will turn around and actually increase?

Ms LAWLER: When those mines come on board. That is when they are actually ...

Mr MALEY: When will that happen?

Ms LAWLER: This is a question you should have asked the Mining minister. They will all have different times. You obviously have little idea about how mining works in the Territory.

Mr MALEY: We are talking about revenue and forward estimates. This is about Treasury, not about Mining.

Ms LAWLER: When they get to FID and are finalised and up and running, we will have a clear picture. A number of options were put through ACIL Allen when it did its report. We will see what eventuates when the onshore oil and gas industry gets to that stage.

The Deputy Under Treasurer has answered that. We will wait and see.

Mr YAN: What is the estimated contribution from the new lithium mines to the mining royalties profile over the forward estimates?

Ms LAWLER: That is commercial-in-confidence, so we do not disclose those figures.

Mr YAN: You obviously know what those figures are and have included them in your forward estimates.

Ms LAWLER: Yes. You can go through the annual reports and talk to the mines, but we do not reveal those figures.

Mr CHAIR: The minister has stated that it is commercial-in-confidence. Please keep your questioning outside of that.

That concludes consideration of Output 3.1.

Output 3.2 – Home Owner Assistance

No questions.

OUTPUT GROUP 4.0 – SUPERANNUATION

Output 4.1 – Superannuation

No questions.

OUTPUT GROUP 5.0 – ECONOMIC REGULATION

Output 5.1 – Utilities Commission

No questions.

OUTPUT GROUP 6.0 – CORPORATE AND SHARED SERVICES

Output 6.1 – Corporate and Governance

Output 6.2 – Shared Services Received

No questions.

STAMP DUTY AMENDMENT BILL 2023

Mr CHAIR: The committee will now move on to questions relating to the Stamp Duty Amendment Bill 2023. Are there any questions?

Mr MALEY: I am unsure whether this is the output. When a car or a piece of machinery such as a bulldozer or grader, is registered, is there a plan from the government in relation to stamp duty payable to those particular plant items?

Ms LAWLER: This is about the legislation; the Stamp Duty Amendment Bill.

I will pass to the Deputy Under Treasurer.

Mr BUTLER: The Stamp Duty Amendment Bill 2023 deals with the abolition of duty on non-land property, which includes some chattels but excludes goods conveyed with land property. Where a plant is registered, it comes with a head of duty of motor vehicle duty, and that is not dealt with in this legislation.

Mr CHAIR: That concludes consideration of the Stamp Duty Amendment Bill 2023.

CENTRAL HOLDING AUTHORITY

OUTPUT GROUP 7.0 – CENTRAL HOLDING AUTHORITY

No questions.

NORTHERN TERRITORY TREASURY CORPORATION

OUTPUT GROUP 8.0 – NORTHERN TERRITORY TREASURY CORPORATION

No questions.

Mr CHAIR: That concludes consideration of the output groups relating to the Department of Treasury and Finance. On behalf of the committee and myself, I thank the departmental officers who provided advice to the Treasurer.

Ms LAWLER: I thank the Treasury staff for their amazing work throughout the whole budget process, putting the budget papers together as well as today.

The committee suspended.

EDUCATION

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Mr CHAIR: Minister, I invite you to introduce the officials accompanying you before we move to your opening statement.

Ms LAWLER: It is an absolute pleasure to be here talking about Education. I have with me Karen Weston, the Chief Executive of the Department of Education; Susan Bowden, the Deputy Chief Executive of Agency Services; Saeed Amin, Deputy Chief Executive of Regional Services, which is schools; Jasmin Aldenhoven, the Chief Financial Officer; and Aderyn Chatterton, Executive Director of Inclusion and Engagement Services. It is lovely to have them all here.

Mr CHAIR: Thank you for the introductions, and thank you to everyone for coming. Minister, would you like to make an opening statement?

Ms LAWLER: I will not make an opening statement this year. I am on the public record saying that. Last year I made an opening statement and the questions were all over the place.

Education is quite comprehensive. We have our folders here. As you can see there is a lot of information in our folders. For ease of everyone, we will go to the output areas and stick to them—early childhood is first—rather than going all over the place.

Mr CHAIR: Before we get to the outputs, the committee will consider the estimates for proposed expenditure contained in the Appropriation (2023–2024) Bill as it relates to the Department of Education. Before we move to the outputs ...

Ms PURICK: Mr Chair, can I get clarification where some questions will sit?

Mr CHAIR: Absolutely.

Ms PURICK: The questions I will be asking are about schooling resource standard funding and the percentages. Where will that sit? That is for all public schools.

Ms LAWLER: That is in Output 7.0, the Australian Government funding.

Mr CHAIR: Are you happy with that?

Ms PURICK: I have Output 9.0 here.

Mr CHAIR: We have 9. Can you outline the output name for that, minister?

Ms LAWLER: Australian Government funding.

Ms PURICK: No, it is not showing up.

Mr CHAIR: We do not have that one on our list, minister.

Ms PURICK: Outputs 9.1 to 9.6 are government education, then it is non-government education and corporate and shared services.

Ms LAWLER: It will be Government Education, Output 9.0 ...

Ms PURICK: Is that just 9.0? Why do I not just ask my questions?

Mr CHAIR: No, we will go through the process. Restate the question you will to ask.

Ms PURICK: What percentage of schooling resource standard is funded by the NT public schools via the Northern Territory Department of Education?

Mr CHAIR: In that case, it would go into Output Group 9.0. If you are happy, minister, this will be the first output.

Are there any other questions you need to clarify, Member for Goyder?

Ms PURICK: I have a similar one on the percentage of schooling resource standard funded to the NT Government by the Commonwealth Government.

Mr CHAIR: They would all be Output 9.0.

Ms PURICK: What NT puts in and what the Commonwealth puts in. Where does that sit?

Mr CHAIR: Output 9.0, so put that in the first one.

I appreciate as we go through the outputs they start with early years, then primary school and secondary. When we get to the first output, it will be the whole of education in Output 9.0. Are you happy with that, minister?

Ms LAWLER: Yes, that is fine.

Mr CHAIR: Member for Nelson, did you say you had a question?

Mr MALEY: When you first start the first line about all-of-agency questions.

Ms PURICK: I will do it in all of agency.

Agency-Related Whole-of-Government Questions on Budget and Fiscal Strategy

Mr CHAIR: The committee will now consider the estimates and proposed expenditure contained in the Appropriation (2023–2024) Bill as they relate to the Department of Education. Are there any agency-related whole-of-government questions on budget and fiscal strategy?

Mrs HERSEY: I was looking forward to an opening statement. Thank you to the department staff who are here.

In the Education annual report it states:

Our guiding principle over the last two years has been to keep students and staff safe ...

Do you think this has been achieved?

Ms LAWLER: Absolutely that has been achieved.

Mrs HERSEY: Can you tell me how many students have been assaulted in schools this year?

Ms LAWLER: That is the wrong output area.

Mrs HERSEY: It is all of agency.

Mr CHAIR: Minister, at a particular point, it will come up. Considering it is related to whole-of-agency questions, would you like to answer it now or would you prefer it in the output; and, if so, which output?

Ms LAWLER: Can you ask the question again. Was it about students?

Mrs HERSEY: Considering you are saying yes, that has been achieved, how many students have been assaulted this year?

Ms LAWLER: We will provide you with our response to that. I find it disappointing that the first question you, as a shadow for Education, has to ask is about something ...

Mrs HERSEY: Minister, it is about student safety.

Mr MALEY: Student safety.

Mr CHAIR: Members for Katherine and Nelson, let her answer the question.

Ms LAWLER: ... negative in Education. I hope lots of teachers and principals are listening to you ask the most negative question as the first question of the Estimates about Education.

I can assure you that our schools are safe environments and work extremely hard on the wellbeing of every student in our schools. Our students with additional needs are supported. Assaults or violence in schools are often perpetrated by students who have mental health issues, trauma or have experienced terrible things in their lives. The schools work hard to address behaviour. We have whole-school behaviour management policies in place.

When you ask the first question of Education in Estimates about violence in schools, it tells everybody that is a political statement and that it is all you are interested in, instead of talking about outcomes for students and the good things happening in our schools. Our schools work very hard. They are exceptionally safe places where our students feel safe. Our teachers work hard to make sure every student is safe in our schools.

I will pass to the chief executive to provide you with a response about violence.

Mr CHAIR: Before we go to the CE I remind members of Standing Order 109; Manner and Form of Questions. I reiterate there are no arguments, inferences, imputations, insults or hypotheticals. Members who are to respond, please respond succinctly. It is the start of the Department of Education; I would hate to have to reiterate this as we go through. I hand to the CE to answer.

Mrs HERSEY: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, minister, for that speech. However, teacher safety and student safety is important in schools. That is what I hear in the community, so it is a pertinent question.

Mr CHAIR: Member for Katherine, she was not denying that. She handed the question to the CE to answer the question for you. Let the CE answer.

Ms WESTON: As the minister said, student and staff safety are at the centre of what our school leaders do and what we do every day in the Department of Education. The data we have is more about staff occupational health and safety. Certainly, events happen. As you know, it is a very big system with 30,000-odd students. Things happen with our students, but it is all managed. We respond to issues and critical incidents ...

Mrs HERSEY: Excuse me, if you do not have the number, can we take that on notice and move on?

Ms LAWLER: Yes, we will take that on notice.

Question on Notice No 2.5

Mr CHAIR: Member for Katherine, please restate the question for the record.

Mrs HERSEY: How many students have been assaulted this year?

Mr CHAIR: Minister, do you accept the question?

Ms LAWLER: Yes.

Mr CHAIR: The question asked by the Member for Katherine has been allocated the number 2.5.

Mrs HERSEY: Given that you have data for teachers and school staff, how many teachers or school staff have been assaulted this year?

Ms LAWLER: Our schools and the whole system work hard to ensure staff are safe in our schools. It is part of our work health and safety.

Ms WESTON: The data we have for the period July 2022 to 31 March 2023 is 28 documented staff injuries.

Mrs HERSEY: How does that compare with last year?

Ms WESTON: For the previous period July 2021 to March 2022 there were 25 staff injuries.

Mr MALEY: When you say staff injuries, is that a physical injury or a mental injury?

Ms LAWLER: It could be either. It could be a range of injuries.

I will pass to Tony Considine. I ask that he be at the table.

Mr CONSIDINE: I am the Executive Director of Quality Standards and Regulation. I would like to clarify the question, please.

Mrs HERSEY: How do the teachers and school staff who have been assaulted compare with last year?

Mr MALEY: I am not sure whether you have answered the question, but what types of injuries are we talking about? Is it physical injuries or mental injuries or just verbal abuse? It is in relation to what type of injury has occurred to those teachers or staff.

Mr CONSIDINE: The best comment I can make on this is in regard to the occupational violence task force. We had a look at this issue. We could not categorise it because when an incident happens in a school, the school responds to it and we collect the data about what a response is, not necessarily what the incident was. An assault can be a physical assault or a verbal assault. Does that help to answer about the position?

Mr MALEY: How many were there—28 did you say?

Mr CONSIDINE: Yes.

Mr MALEY: There were 28 of those physical or verbal assaults in schools last year, but we do not know what the injuries were.

Mr CONSIDINE: That was from our safety record.

Mr MALEY: Are you not sure what the injuries were from that?

Mr CONSIDINE: No. I cannot tell you what the injuries were because I do not have an injury report.

Mrs HERSEY: How many hours leave have teachers or school staff taken due to those 28 incidents?

Ms LAWLER: During the period 1 October to 31 March 2023 there were 384 work health and safety incidents reported relating to department employees. Some of those might be slips and falls as well. There is a whole range of work health and safety incidents.

As you can imagine, they are in remote communities as well—it is not just urban—so the work health and safety incidents we would have to take on notice concerning days. They would vary considerably depending on the injury. We can get some information on that. We can take that one on notice.

Mrs HERSEY: Did you say 384?

Ms LAWLER: Yes, the work health and safety incidents reported. That could be a teacher playing sport with a kid and rolling their ankle. We have talked about assaults. It could be anything from a trip hazard or a fall all the way through to a back injury.

Question on Notice No 2.6

Mr CHAIR: Member for Katherine, please restate the question for the record.

Mrs HERSEY: How many hours leave have teachers or school staff taken due to a physical assault?

Ms LAWLER: Do you only want physical assault; you do not want it in relation to work health and safety?

Mrs HERSEY: Just in regard to physical assault.

Mr CHAIR: Minister, do you accept the question?

Ms LAWLER: Yes.

Mr CHAIR: The question asked by the Member for Katherine has been allocated the number 2.6.

Ms PURICK: I will just jump in because it is semi-related.

How many times this year and last year—because it is six months this year—have NT police officers had to respond to incidents in schools? The auxiliaries cannot, and I know and you know there have been incidents when police have had to attend. It could have been a student/student altercation or a student/teacher altercation. Do you have those figures?

Ms LAWLER: Whether it is a school-based constable or an auxiliary on the school grounds, at times, there is the need to call the police for an incident. We have all been at school and know there are days with school fights and various incidents, and they still occur on school grounds ...

Ms PURICK: It also involves knives and weapons at school, not only altercations between students. How many times have NT police officers had to attend an incident in our Territory schools this year and last year?

Ms WESTON: The information we have is on reported incidents at Darwin and Palmerston schools where we have police auxiliaries. From 1 January to 22 May 2023, there were nine incidents that were reported with police auxiliaries in schools.

Ms PURICK: That was not my question. My question was how many times NT police officers—not auxiliaries—had to attend Northern Territory schools because of an incident, whether it be between students, students and staff or an intruder in the school, for example?

Mr CHAIR: Member for Goyder, noting that they will probably take the question on notice and we have ...

Ms LAWLER: I have just been handed the written questions provided to you. In relation to how many reported incidents required police attendance for each school for each year, Police, Fire and Emergency Services advises that it does not have this level of data easily available.

Ms PURICK: We do not know how many police have gone to our Northern Territory schools because of an incident?

Ms LAWLER: It would be a matter of them having to go through their database to be able to access that information. We can take that on notice.

Question on Notice No 2.7

Mr CHAIR: Member for Goyder, please restate the question for the record.

Ms PURICK: How many times have Northern Territory police officers—not auxiliaries—had to attend a Northern Territory public school because of an incident or altercation involving a fight, weapons or intruders?

Mr CHAIR: Minister, do you accept the question?

Ms LAWLER: Yes.

Mr CHAIR: The question asked by the Member for Goyder has been allocated the number 2.7.

Mrs HERSEY: Following on from that, how many knife crimes have been reported this year at NT schools?

Ms LAWLER: There have been eight incidents involving edged weapons, including knives and scissors, recorded from the start of 2023 to 17 April 2023. Three of those incidents were outside of school grounds.

Mrs HERSEY: How does that compare with last year?

Ms LAWLER: We do not have last year's figures at hand.

Mrs HERSEY: I would like that on notice.

Question on Notice No 2.8

Mr CHAIR: Member for Katherine, please restate the question for the record.

Mrs HERSEY: How many knife crimes were reported at NT schools in the last year?

Mr CHAIR: Minister, do you accept the question?

Ms LAWLER: Yes.

Mr CHAIR: The question asked by the Member for Katherine has been allocated the number 2.8.

Mrs HERSEY: How many suspensions have been recorded in the last year due to verbal abuse of staff?

Ms LAWLER: Our schools have whole-school behaviour management plans in place. Starting from preschool, they work hard and talk about behaviour in school and what the expectations are, whether that is in school assembly or individuals in class. Classroom teachers work hard to be clear about expectations in

school. That is one of the great things about schools. If students are not getting those boundaries from families and parents, then that is the great work from schools regarding what is required of students.

In 2022 there were 1,381 individual students suspended from government schools in the Northern Territory. Usually there is a re-entry meeting, which involves making sure that those behaviours are not repeated and working with the student on what caused that behaviour and what needs to change so that the child can come back to the classroom successfully.

Mrs HERSEY: Given those re-entry meetings that the students have, do you know how many of those 1,381 had a follow-up through suspension?

Ms LAWLER: No, I do not. We are not really clear. The number of suspensions in 2022 was 1,381 and the number of incidents was 2,471. The difference of about 1,100 could be the students who are repeating. There are also cases when the child may not be suspended; the behaviour that occurred might be an incident, but not borderline around a suspension as well.

The number of incidents is 2,471, but we do not have suspensions in relation to particular students. That data would be held by the schools. The schools would know the students who are not doing the right thing.

Mrs HERSEY: Given that we were talking about verbal abuse of staff, do you know how many suspensions have been recorded in the last year due to physical assaults of staff?

Ms LAWLER: No, the department does not have that breakdown at hand.

Mrs HERSEY: Can we put that on notice?

Question on Notice No 2.9

Mr CHAIR: Member for Katherine, please restate the question for the record.

Mrs HERSEY: How many suspensions have been recorded in the last year due to physical assaults of staff?

Mr CHAIR: Minister, do you accept the question?

Ms LAWLER: Yes. The department is checking to see whether it has the data available.

Mr CHAIR: If not, that can be the response that comes back. The question asked by the Member for Katherine has been allocated the number 2.9.

Mrs HERSEY: How many incidents have been recorded with an edged weapon, and how does that compare with last year?

Ms LAWLER: We just gave you those figures.

Mrs HERSEY: How many incidents of property damage have occurred at schools in the last year?

Ms LAWLER: Susan Bowden, the deputy chief executive, is just finding that data.

Ms BOWDEN: The department takes very seriously any break-ins to schools and damage to property. We act with our colleagues in DIPL to get repairs done as swiftly as possible. From 1 July 2022 to March 2023, there were 215 break-ins.

Mr MALEY: What was the cost of fixing that damage?

Ms BOWDEN: Sorry, I gave you the wrong data. From 1 July 2022 to 31 March 2023, damage due to school break-ins was 215, and the cost of that damage was approximately \$800,000.

Mrs HERSEY: Can you tell us where that was most concentrated, where the damage occurred?

Ms LAWLER: I will pass to the Deputy CE, as she has the data on the regions.

Ms BOWDEN: Were you wanting school break-ins by region?

Mrs HERSEY: Yes.

Ms BOWDEN: In the Central Australia region, there were 49; the East Arnhem region, 20; the Barkly region, 20; Darwin, 32; Big Rivers, 51; and the Top End, 43.

Mr MALEY: Is the \$800,000 the total cost of the figures you just stated?

Ms BOWDEN: Yes.

Mr MALEY: Out of which budget did the \$800,000 come from to do those repairs?

Ms LAWLER: It would come through either the urgent minors or repairs and maintenance. It is usually the urgent minors budget through the department's infrastructure budget. It is centrally held money from the department. The department has a repairs and maintenance budget.

Mr MALEY: Has the \$800,000 come from the Education department?

Ms LAWLER: There is a couple of categories. Urgent minors is for things that are not planned for that need to be upgraded or repaired. Through Education, there is also a minor new works budget that is for ongoing repairs. Schools identify repairs that may be needed—replacement of a door or upgrades to carpets et cetera. They would have their planned upgrades, which is one budget, but there is another for urgent minor repairs such as a break-in, a window broken, graffiti or a broken air conditioner. It does not always have to be criminal damage; sometimes it is when ageing equipment fails. That is through their general budget.

Mr MALEY: Is that \$800,000 a result of criminal damage, planned upgrades or a combination? If it is a planned upgrade ...

Ms LAWLER: The \$800,000 was purely for damage to schools through break-and-enter or graffiti crime.

Mr MALEY: Does that \$800,000 for damage to schools through crime come out of the Education department's budget somewhere?

Ms LAWLER: Yes.

Mr MALEY: If the \$800,000 was not spent on that property damage, it could have been spent on students, sporting equipment or upgrading schools?

Ms LAWLER: It would have been spent on infrastructure upgrades. It is out of the infrastructure budget. Schools have a global school budget that supplies teachers and resources in schools. The specific budget of \$800,000 would come out of the money for repairs and maintenance in infrastructure.

Mr MALEY: If the money was not spent, where would that money go?

Ms LAWLER: That is a hypothetical.

Mr MALEY: Not really. If there was \$800,000 in the budget that was not spent per year because there were no planned upgrades or property damage, where would that money go?

Ms LAWLER: It would be spent on infrastructure in a school, because it comes out of the infrastructure budget.

Mr MALEY: You would replace infrastructure just because there was money left over.

Ms LAWLER: There is a budget to do ongoing repairs across the Territory schools. There may be large amounts for replacing roofs—such as in Moil, Member for Johnston—and smaller amounts in schools for painting, upgrades to toilets or replacing tiles. That \$800,000 would have been spent otherwise on some sort of infrastructure.

The reality is that there will always be some damage to schools from people who do not do the right thing. That is Australia-wide. That \$800,000 is what the repair bills are.

Mr MALEY: You said the \$800,000 that was used to repair property damage as a result of crime cut into the budget of general repair work to upgrade the facilities at schools. This means that money could have been used to replace carpet, replace tiles and upgrade toilet blocks; is that correct?

Ms LAWLER: Yes, that is correct. That is the reality of running a large department that has 32,000 students.

Mr MALEY: The impact of crime results in a school not being able to do planned upgrade work because it has had to spend the money on property damage.

Ms LAWLER: We manage our minor new works and manage our upgrades across the department and all our schools in the Territory. The reality is whichever education system you are in around the world ...

Mr MALEY: We are talking about the Northern Territory. Could we just stick to the Territory?

Ms LAWLER: ... money would need to be spent on damage. It is not something we want. Nobody wants criminal damage. Our schools are calm and have orderly environments where the vast majority do the right thing every day. That is why I am disappointed in this as the first line of questioning in Estimates. For you who visits schools, Member for Nelson, Girraween Primary School—you cannot tell me that you do not go in to an orderly, beautiful school environment. I was just at Howard Springs. Katherine High School is a beautiful school environment where the vast majority of people do the right thing. The vast majority of kids love their schools and look after their schools.

Mr MALEY: That is not the question, minister. Thank you for your rant.

Ms LAWLER: Occasionally there are people who do not do that, which is where this money comes in. This negative stream of questioning about crime we are getting from the CLP is disappointing.

Mr MALEY: Speaking of Girraween Primary School, if there is money spent there out of \$800,000 repairing damage caused by the crime crisis this Labor government has caused, that means the school cannot be beautiful because the murals cannot be painted or the toilets cannot be upgraded. Is that correct? Yes or no; it is pretty simple.

Ms LAWLER: Member for Nelson, you do your lawyer thing. It is not yes or no.

Mr MALEY: Yes, it is.

Ms LAWLER: Schools have a number of avenues for them to do upgrades and repairs ...

Mr MALEY: I am not talking about that. I am talking about the \$800,000 you spoke about. Can you answer my question?

Ms LAWLER: The \$800,000 is ...

Mr CHAIR: Member for Nelson, I will get the minister to answer your question if she does not.

Minister, can we answer the question the Member for Nelson has asked?

Ms LAWLER: I was answering it.

Mr CHAIR: I appreciate that and I understand there is more to it. We need to be conscious that the Member for Nelson has asked a question, if we can get to the answer. It is not as simple as that.

Ms LAWLER: Yes, it is not as simple as that. The \$800,000 could be spent on a range of projects across schools. There are also 153 schools across the Northern Territory, so we have a substantial minor new works budget to make sure our schools are kept in good shape and have beautiful environments.

Mrs HERSEY: Given that we are talking about property damage, how many school buildings have been damaged this year and how many Education cars?

Ms LAWLER: We will have to take that on notice. We do not have those figures.

Mr CHAIR: They did provide you with an answer about buildings. Are you just asking for cars now? You got buildings before from the CE. Can we make it just about cars?

Mrs HERSEY: Yes.

Question on Notice No 2.10

Mr CHAIR: Member for Katherine, please restate the question for the record.

Mrs HERSEY: How many Education cars have been damaged this year?

Mr CHAIR: Minister, do you accept the question?

Ms LAWLER: Yes.

Mr CHAIR: The question asked by the Member for Katherine has been allocated the number 2.10.

Ms PURICK: What percentage of the schooling resource standard is funded to the Northern Territory public schools by the Department of Education?

Ms LAWLER: Is that a percentage or a figure?

Ms PURICK: A percentage.

Ms LAWLER: I will pass to Chief Financial Officer Jasmin Aldenhoven.

Ms PURICK: I am after the percentage of the schooling resource standard.

Ms ALDENHOVEN: Government schools with the school resourcing standard are transitioning up. In the last report publicly recorded through the National School Resourcing Board, which was 2020, the contribution—there are two contributions, the contribution by the Northern Territory Government and the contribution by the Commonwealth.

Ms PURICK: I am after the percentage of the schooling resource standard funded to public schools by the Department of Education. What percentage of this standard is funded to schools by the Commonwealth Government—NT and Commonwealth?

Ms ALDENHOVEN: Going back to 2020 the contribution by the Northern Territory Government was 54.96% and the Australian Government contribution was 44.4%.

Ms PURICK: How many Department of Education staff had any type of remote or work-from-home arrangements intrastate, interstate or internationally in 2022–23?

Ms LAWLER: The Deputy CE is chasing that information.

Ms PURICK: How many external consultants were employed by the Department of Education in 2022–23?

Ms LAWLER: We have that. While we are chasing the previous question information, I will pass to Jasmin Aldenhoven, the chief financial officer, to answer in regard to the consultants.

Ms ALDENHOVEN: We have 27 consultants employed to date for 2022–23.

Ms PURICK: Is it possible to get a list of the type of work they were engaged to do and the cost per consultancy? You might need to take that on notice.

Ms LAWLER: No, we can provide that.

Ms ALDENHOVEN: Written questions had consultancy in them as well. I am happy to provide the type of work.

Ms LAWLER: In regard to consultancy expenditure, there is a long list, so I will not read all of them out. There are things such as consultancy on the review of preschool funding, which Nous Group did. That cost

\$223,000. There is the review of secondary provision that is under way at the moment, which is being done by Deloitte. That is \$112,000. We are doing a review of FaFT, which is \$82,000.

I think you understand that sometimes it is best to get a consultant in. They will provide an independent view of it rather than the agency looking into that.

Ms PURICK: I have no issue with what you are saying. Do the consultant figures you provide include costs such as airfares to get them here, accommodation and hire cars?

Ms LAWLER: Yes, they will put together a tender, unless they are a panel contractor, and that will be the package. Let us make up a figure—‘For \$200,000, we will deliver a report with recommendations, including X number of schools we visit; five remote schools; 10 urban schools; this, that and the other.’ The procurement panel assesses that.

There were 27 consultancies. Some of them looked at curriculum and school reviews—those sorts of things.

Ms PURICK: Is it possible to get a copy of that list?

Ms LAWLER: I am happy to table that.

Mr MALEY: What was the total cost of those consultancies?

Ms LAWLER: It was 27 consultancies at \$1.7m.

Mr MALEY: Was that just in the last financial year?

Ms LAWLER: Yes, from 1 July 2022.

Mr CHAIR: The minister will table the document that she read from and we will get copies for the Estimates Committee.

Does the Deputy CE or the minister have an answer on that?

Ms LAWLER: I will go to the deputy chief executive.

Ms BOWDEN: Member for Goyder, can you confirm that your question was about staff employed outside of the Northern Territory?

Ms PURICK: Yes, remote or home arrangements.

Ms BOWDEN: Yes. The data that we have comes out of PIPS. We use that as our single point of truth for our data. I can share with you that the number of staff employed as at 31 March outside of the NT was zero, according to the PIPS data. However, we have staff who are on, for example, fixed-term, part-time or casual arrangements and those sorts of things. We do not collect the data of flexible work arrangements because, obviously, we want to support our staff. Sometimes it might be health reasons, women with children or husbands with children who want to have more flexible arrangements, so we do not have that data.

Ms PURICK: That is okay; thank you.

Mr GUYULA: What work has been done so far to roll back the effective enrolment policy? Will school budgets for 2024 be determined by school attendance this year, or will remote schools see an increase in funding for 2024 so that schools can work with elders and leaders to create programs that will increase school attendance outcomes?

Ms LAWLER: That is a good question. Access Economics presented its final report and recommendations to government at the end of 2022. That report is available. We accepted those recommendations and have already started the work on implementing them. Two recommendations from the review are being implemented in the short term, so literally immediately we are working on those.

The first one was to redesign the minimum funding floor for small and large schools in remote. That will impact some schools that are applicable to your communities. This will provide schools with greater funding certainty and the ability to make informed decisions about workforce and resource allocation with the school.

The department will have this implemented for 2024. That is like a minimum funding floor for small and large schools in remote, so they will know how much money they will get. They can plan better with that. Some of the schools in your electorate would know how much money they have in the longer term. That was recommendation six.

The other one we are implementing is recommendation seven. It is about the support for schools to manage their budgets over time. Sometimes principals are good at curriculum, behaviour management and working with kids, but do not have experience with finances. It is about helping them to manage their budgets over time.

That is also to reduce the barriers to spending faced by some remote communities, supporting their budget planning, managing the pluses and minuses, the deficits and surpluses and the workforce. Sometimes principals are worried about spending the money because they think they might get into a situation where they do not have money for their school. Recommendation seven is about helping schools do that.

The other one that is important when we talk about effective enrolment or funding for schools is the work I am doing with the federal government on the school resourcing model. I have had conversations with Jason Clare, the federal Minister for Education, and said that we need to have our schools fully funded by the federal government. We are seeing the work they have already agreed to in Alice Springs. There is \$40m more for schools in Alice Springs, which is part of the funding for the agreement for Alice Springs.

I want to see that rolled out across the Territory. I have an Education ministers' meeting at the end of this month. I will be asking Jason Clare for the federal government to fully fund our schools in the Northern Territory so that we are the same as the private schools on the east coast of Australia.

I will pass to Susan Bowden to add to effective enrolment.

Ms BOWDEN: We are very committed to implementing the findings as well as the recommendations from the Effective Enrolment Review.

To expand on what the minister was talking about, recommendation one was to communicate the intent and move towards an enrolment-based rather than an attendance-based methodology. The minister announced at the end of last year that we will be allocating needs-based funding to schools on that basis. This will take time because we are also doing deep and important work on funding for students with additional needs, as well as looking at senior secondary provision and preschool funding. We are looking at all those as a broader school funding reform package.

Mr GUYULA: During Question Time in March you stated that many schools that are asking for more funding actually have over \$1m in their bank accounts.

I understand from discussions with many schools that they have operational funds that are expended for educational purposes during the school year, such as play equipment, new flooring or decking, funds for school council operations or emergency situations et cetera. This money is accounted for and is not spare money.

Do you believe that there is improper conduct in our schools? Could you advise which schools have over \$1m in their bank accounts that you believe is not being used for school purposes?

Ms LAWLER: No. First and foremost there are schools—I was correct when I answered in Question Time—that have large amounts of money in their bank accounts that they are not spending right now on students. I firmly believe that if you have money in your school bank account, it should be spent on the students there right now.

They are decisions for the schools. We have school boards and councils. The school council should be working with the school community to identify how those dollars are spent. The vast majority comes from the Education department budget from the federal government and the NT Government.

I agree some of it is school fundraising. If it is, that is when they work with school council to identify how they want to spend that. Sometimes schools will say that out of their fundraising dollars they might put in some new play equipment, buy some new laptops or pay for a school trip or swimming. Schools do their own fundraising, but the vast majority of the money in schools comes from the school resourcing model of the Education department.

There are schools with substantial amounts of money. I do not want to list those publicly because that is their business. The Education department is working with those schools to provide that strategic support to them. If you have a lot of money in your school bank account, what will it be used for? Is it for employing a music teacher? What will engage those students and get them to school?

If there is a school that has a lower attendance, we look at the money the school has and say, 'What do you think your community could do or would like to see to get kids to school?' It might be having a drama, dance or music program that will engage kids more, or it might be putting in a computer lab that will get kids to school.

It is about improving outcomes such as attendance or literacy and numeracy. Perhaps the literacy or spelling results are not good and the school may need to spend some of its money to bring in experts to do professional development, so it has to pay for relief teachers. Also, a school may buy more maths equipment.

Sometimes principals accumulate money. Sometimes money accumulates in schools because principals turn over, particularly in remote schools. A principal who remains five to seven years in a school is clear about where they will spend money and what to save their money for. In remote schools where principals turn over, the money accumulates. When a new principal arrives, it takes them a while to get their head around the community's direction for the school.

A large amount of money is sitting in school bank accounts. We are working with schools to address that and not to spend the money willy-nilly but to target it on their school improvement plans to improve attendance and literacy and numeracy. It may be by employing another teacher or buying more computers. We need to make sure that money is spent wisely.

Ms BOWDEN: As the minister indicated, the department has been working closely with schools on lowering the amount in their cash balances. We have what schools call cash reserves that are for when schools flag that they want to save funding for infrastructure upgrades, a master plan, playground equipment, technology and ICT resources or an interstate excursion. There is a range of reasons that schools have cash reserves.

We have done extensive work in identifying those reserves. Schools will be held accountable for spending the reserves, so when we take out what schools have identified as their priorities, the surplus in reserves has significantly lowered. It is now \$2.3m that is surplus to schools' needs across the Territory. Schools have done a good job identifying where they want to put their reserves and doing their future planning.

Mr GUYULA: In your answer to Written Question No 314, you outlined that teachers with ESL qualifications are not known by the department. Why is there no record of how many teachers have university ESL qualifications when many teachers are working in 100% ESL settings? This should be a requirement. Can this information be provided?

Ms LAWLER: I highly value English as an additional language or dialect teachers and their work. Some have formal qualifications and some have undertaken professional development in the Northern Territory. In our remote schools where 100% of our students have English as an additional language or dialect, those qualifications are held in high regard. The difficulty is often getting people who have those skills.

I will pass to the Deputy Chief Executive of Regional Services.

Mr CHAIR: Sorry, minister; we will hold there. It is time for lunch. I am more than happy to come back to this response after that.

The committee suspended.

Ms LAWLER: We have to clarify one of our responses. It was to a question from the Member for Goyder about the schooling resource standard.

I will pass to the chief executive.

Ms WESTON: My recollection is that the Member for Goyder asked some questions about the SRS funding.

The standard that is set by the Commonwealth Government under the *Australian Education Act* is \$13,060 for primary students and 16,413 for secondary students. The department is annually assessed by an

independent board called the National School Resourcing Board in regard to what proportion of our funding we are providing towards the SRS. Our agreement with the Commonwealth for 2020 required us to have a contribution of 57% of the SRS—the schooling resource standard. We reported, and it was confirmed by the audit by the National School Resourcing Board, as contributing 54.96%. We were slightly under what was required under our partnership agreement.

We put forward to the resourcing board some of our mitigating factors in relation to that and the reasons for the shortfall, which have all been assessed by the board. We have been assessed as meeting its satisfactory expectations around the standard. Some of the mitigating factors were difficulties in recruiting staff—you might recall that 2020 was the middle of COVID; funding being redirected to a stimulus investment for infrastructure works; repairs and maintenance were unable to be undertaken in some remote locations due to not being able to get tradespeople in; we had decreased expenditure on consultancies; and we had to redirect some of our resources for planning for and responding to the COVID pandemic.

The National School Resourcing Board has not released and had accepted by the Commonwealth its publication for 2021 in regard to its assessment of how we are going against the schooling resource standard.

We need to clarify something for the record. We mentioned a figure of 44%, which is the Australian Government contribution towards the Department of Education's total revenue. That is just tidying up what the 44% was.

Mr MALEY: You mentioned a shortfall; what was it? You did not mention what it was.

Ms WESTON: The standard is 57% of the SRS, and we achieved 54.96% of the SRS. It is 2.04%.

Mr MALEY: Is there a monetary figure on that?

Ms WESTON: There is a monetary figure published—\$18.343m.

Mr CHAIR: Member for Mulka, did you have a follow-on question or did you want to restate where you were going with that question before the break?

Mr GUYULA: Yes, but the minister had started answering.

Ms LAWLER: It was up to Saeed, the deputy chief executive, to talk about whether we keep records of teachers with English as an additional language qualification.

Mr AMIN: We do not have formal records of teachers with EAL/D qualifications because it is not a requirement from the Teacher Registration Board. We have about 12,700 students who are identified as learning with EAL/D and are therefore assessed through learning progression, so it would be an expectation that those teachers are fully qualified formally or informally across that.

We have nine schools using the Indigenous languages and cultures program across the East Arnhem, Top End, Big Rivers and Central regions. Our expectation is that those teachers are qualified in that area.

Mr GUYULA: I will go back to another question. Can you clarify that there is only \$2.3m surplus across all school bank accounts now, rather than the \$100m that you stated in Question Time in March?

Ms LAWLER: I will pass to Susan Bowden, who can clarify that. She talked about the substantial amounts of money and can give you the total figure. There is a substantial amount of money in school bank accounts across the Northern Territory, but they have worked with schools to ensure they have allocations for that, so we are clear that they are saving for something or will use it for something and that it is committed. Instead of that amount of money sitting there growing year in and year out, it is used for something.

Ms BOWDEN: I will clarify that schools get a total cash asset that includes all their cash for a range of different pieces that they need to use. After you take out the liabilities that they have to pay for, the cash benchmark which is to pay for their staffing—assistant teachers and other staff—less what we were talking about in terms of the cash reserves that might be for vehicles, furniture, buildings, playgrounds et cetera, we have what is called an untied figure. This is the figure you are after. It is approximately \$20.7m.

The figure I was talking about is when you were referring to a couple of schools, which was approximately \$2.3m.

Ms LAWLER: I will also clarify that there is about \$140m in school bank accounts. Schools need to use that money with the students. The department has been working to push the schools and saying, 'You need to work around your plans. What will you use that money for?' The students who are there now need to benefit from that amount of money.

As the deputy chief executive said, schools have been able to come back and say that they have plans for that money, which is good. That is what I want to see. I do not want to see money just sitting there accumulating interest or whatever. We want to see that it is earmarked to drive school improvements. That is what government wants. How will they get more kids to school? How will they improve literacy and numeracy?

That is the change to effective enrolment. One of the things that concerns me is if we put more money into school bank accounts, it has to be used to drive improvements. Every single dollar we use as a government has to get more kids to school and make sure that when they are going to school, they are engaged and want to learn and that they are doing quality reading, numeracy, arts and culture, and health programs. I am sure the community wants to see that money being spent on rich cultural programs in the school and being used to employ staff.

I have been clear as minister that the money has to be allocated and used. We are hearing that the department has done that and that schools are saying they will use that money. I want to see that money used. This time next year when we are sitting here, we want to see that the money has been allocated and used properly.

Mrs LAMBLEY: Can I clarify whether the \$140m is tied or untied?

Ms LAWLER: That is the issue. The money has gone to the schools, and now it is up to the schools to tie it to things that align with their school action plans. Their school improvement plan has to align with it. It is money that has gone to schools over many years and some has accumulated over the years.

Mrs LAMBLEY: What is the \$20.7m? What is the difference?

Ms LAWLER: That is the untied. Schools have said it is specifically untied. We want to see it all used and tied.

Mrs HERSEY: We were talking about the damage. There were 215 property damages in the last year at a cost of \$880,000. How much is crime forecast to impact the overall Education budget in the forward estimates?

Ms LAWLER: That would not be budgeted for at all. That money came out of the minor new works or urgent minors.

Mr MALEY: Is that \$880,000 set to increase or decrease next year?

Ms LAWLER: You ask questions that are not logical. That money comes out of the minor new works money. There is an allocation there. We do not know. The absolute aim is to have no damage to our schools.

Mr MALEY: I will rephrase my question. I am talking about the allocation to minor repairs. Is that increasing?

Ms LAWLER: Repairs and maintenance has gone up this year. It is \$34m for repairs and maintenance in Education. Minor new works is \$13.2m.

Mr MALEY: What were they last year?

Ms LAWLER: Capital works is \$29.4m.

Last year the minor new works was \$28m, so it has gone up about \$6m. We have also seen across government \$30m more put into repairs and maintenance. You can ask that question at DIPL.

Repairs and maintenance to 1 July 2022 was \$28.338m, minor new works was \$14.68m and capital works was \$23.8. Those two are flipped around a bit. Repairs and maintenance, which would be where most of that money would come out, has gone from \$28.338m to \$34m. DIPL has an increase of \$30m for repairs and maintenance because a lot of the infrastructure across the Territory, particularly in Darwin—it is 50 years since Cyclone Tracy—a lot of our schools and hospitals are 50 years old and have to be repaired.

Mr MALEY: Would crime have been a factor in the increase as well?

Ms LAWLER: No. That is the repairs and maintenance regarding ...

Mr MALEY: Was crime not a factor at all?

Ms LAWLER: The repairs and maintenance is for the ageing infrastructure of our schools and health clinics. That is the focus.

Mrs HERSEY: How many school hours have been lost due to crime onsite or not being able to use the facilities due to damage?

Ms LAWLER: It is about time you moved on to something else that is about teaching, learning and students ...

Mrs HERSEY: Minister, with all due respect, it is up to me ...

Ms LAWLER: No due respect! I cannot stand it when people say 'due respect' because it means there is no respect.

Mrs HERSEY: Sorry not sorry.

Ms LAWLER: I am losing respect I had of you because I would have thought, as the opposition spokesman for Education, you would have asked some questions about students.

Mrs HERSEY: It is up to me to ask the questions.

Mr DEPUTY CHAIR: Minister ...

Ms LAWLER: Do not just talk about crime.

Mr DEPUTY CHAIR: Order!

Ms LAWLER: It is just pathetic.

Mrs HERSEY: It is the safety of teachers and students in schools and it is up to me to ask the questions.

Ms LAWLER: You are pathetic, Member for Katherine. I am sure that teachers in Katherine would not be impressed with your line of questions.

Mr DEPUTY CHAIR: Minister Lawler! Ladies and gentlemen, we will have 30-second break. Have a drink of water, take a breath and we will recommence in 30 seconds.

The committee suspended.

Mr CHAIR: Welcome back to Estimates. I am Joel Bowden, the Deputy Chair standing in for the current Chair, Mr Brent Potter.

As is custom we will go through procedural notes about the manner of questions. The following rules apply. Questions cannot be debated. That is rule one. Rule two is questions should not contain a whole heap of things, including arguments. It is really simple.

Minister, please do not engage in argument or debate. Honourable members, please do not engage in argument or debate. It is simple. Otherwise, we will have a break for 30 seconds or you will have one for an hour. It is easy.

Mrs HERSEY: Before we go on, I would like the minister to withdraw what she just said in those disparaging remarks about me. It is unfair. It is up to me the line of questioning I take on behalf of the Northern Territorians I am here representing today. I ask the minister to withdraw those offensive remarks.

Ms LAWLER: I do not withdraw anyway.

Mr DEPUTY CHAIR: Member for Katherine, there was so much argument and debate going on, I could not hear myself. No-one could hear me; I was raising my voice to try to get over the top. I had to stand up and walk out of the room.

We should just move on in a manner that is civil and nice, considering we are in the budget Estimates Committee and we have not moved on from agency-related whole-of-government questions. If you would like to move on, we can.

Mrs HERSEY: How many schools have had to close for a day or longer due to criminal acts or criminal damage to property? What cost impact has this had?

Ms LAWLER: We do not have that answer. I think there would be very few. There have been no school closures due to crime—none, zero.

Mrs HERSEY: Given that there has been one—although it is not a public school—O’Loughlin ...

Ms LAWLER: That is not public; it is not a government school.

Mrs HERSEY: I just said that. Can I take that on notice, Mr Chair? You are saying there have been none at all.

Ms LAWLER: This is government schools. There are no government schools.

Mrs HERSEY: No government schools?

Ms LAWLER: You could write to Catholic Education if you like to seek clarification from it. I am sure it would be impressed with your question as much as I am. The answer is no for government schools.

Mrs HERSEY: Moving on to school attendance, does the Territory have the lowest school attendance rate in Australia?

Ms LAWLER: Yes.

Mrs HERSEY: What can you attribute that to?

Ms LAWLER: It is clear what the issues are in the Northern Territory. Probably the main one is poverty—families that struggle to get their children to school for a variety of reasons. It is also people who do not necessarily understand the value of education. We also see families now—it is more of a trend—that choose to go on holidays during school time. When I was a student, we never went on holidays during school time. I often hear of families who take their kids to Bali in the middle of school term. I say to them, ‘Your kids need to be in school every day’. There is a variety of reasons.

We are seeing in the data—which is an interesting trend—that elsewhere in Australia school refusals have gone up since COVID. It is on the agenda of the ministerial council. Our data on changes in school attendance was some of the lowest. Ours declined 3.7% and in other states it has been 4.4%. In other states there are greater declines in attendance than there are in the Northern Territory. We think that is partly due to COVID. Many kids down south stayed home during COVID and because of anxiety or a heap of reasons they do not want to go back to the classroom.

Yes, there is a heap of reasons why a child does not go to school. If you have anything to do with schools, which I hope you do, Member for Katherine, I hope you have those conversations with principals on the ground because they will tell you that every school has different reasons for kids not attending. Every kid who does not attend school probably has a different reason.

The worrying trend is we are seeing more children refusing to go to school Australia-wide. It is a sad situation because we know how valuable school is.

Mrs HERSEY: What was the percentage of school attendance this year in both Years 1 to 6 and Years 7 to 10?

Ms LAWLER: I can pass to Aderyn Chatterton to give you the comprehensive data we have on attendance. We have a large amount of data on attendance.

Ms CHATTERTON: Can I clarify the question, please, Member for Katherine?

Mrs HERSEY: The percentage of school attendance in Years 1 to 6 and Years 7 to 10.

Ms CHATTERTON: For the period I have a number of Terms.

Mrs HERSEY: This year.

Mr DEPUTY CHAIR: To clarify, what do you have the reporting period to?

Ms CHATTERTON: I have Term 1, 2023 and it is broken into phases of learning. We have the early years. I have it broken down by region, which I can table.

A member: Just read it out.

Ms CHATTERTON: For the Barkly region, the early years total attendance rate for Term 1, 2023 was 49.9%. The Barkly region primary years total attendance rate was 54.3%. The Barkly region middle years total attendance rate was 45.3%. The Barkly region senior years total attendance rate was 43.6%. The region total was 48.5%.

For the Big Rivers region, the early years attendance total for Term 1, 2023 was 67.7%. In the primary years in Big Rivers, it was 69.2%; in the middle years, 60.8%; and in the senior years, 49.8%. The region total was 62.9%.

For the Central region, the early years attendance was 73.4%. In the primary years, it was 73.8%; in the middle years, 68.3%; and in the senior years, 61.9%. The region total was 69.3%.

In the Darwin region for Term 1, 2023 the early years attendance was 88.2%. In the primary years, it was 89.2%; the middle years, 84.9%; and in the senior years, 85.2%. The Darwin region total was 86.3%.

In the East Arnhem region, the early years attendance was 57.9%. In the primary years, it was 62.5%; in the middle years, 64.3%; and in the senior years, 55.9%. The region total was 60.2%.

Our last region is the Top End region. In the early years, attendance was 84.1%. In the primary years, it was 83.8%; in the middle years, 78.0%; and in the senior years, 76.5%. The region total for the Top End was 80.2%.

At a whole-of-system level, Term 1, 2023 was 77.1%. We should acknowledge and celebrate that is a growth of 0.6% in comparison with Term 1 last year, which is a reflection of the great work that is occurring in every school in the implementation of our engagement strategy. We continue to see that growth occurring and the line going up in every region throughout Term 2 in the Northern Territory.

Mrs LAMBLEY: Could you repeat that? What was the growth?

Ms CHATTERTON: It was 0.6% in comparison with Term 1, 2022.

Mrs LAMBLEY: Do you still provide a full breakdown of all the schools?

Ms CHATTERTON: Yes.

Ms LAWLER: It is on the website.

Mrs LAMBLEY: Where do people find that?

Ms LAWLER: If you go to the Education department website ...

Ms CHATTERTON: The Education department has it broken down term by term and region by region and you can see school by school.

Mr MALEY: You said it was 0.6%, can you give that as a number not a percentage?

Ms CHATTERTON: The Term 1, 2023 whole-of-system Northern Territory Government school attendance rate was 77.1%, which is a slight increase of 0.6% compared with Term 1, 2022.

Ms LAWLER: We do not have the numbers; you can do the maths.

Mr MALEY: Is that a result of the \$10m engagement program?

Ms CHATTERTON: It is a result of the great work that occurs in our schools every day. Every school has a focus on the engagement strategy, and every region has a focus. There are key projects occurring in our department to support the engagement strategy.

Mr MALEY: Will you take that question on notice and give us a number?

Ms LAWLER: You always want something black and white. The student numbers would vary over the Term because kids come and go. It was a 0.6% increase over the Term.

Ms CHATTERTON: To clarify, are you seeking the specific attendance rate?

Mr MALEY: You said it was a growth of 0.6%. Did the numbers grow from 300 to 400, for example?

Ms LAWLER: There are 32,000 students in the Northern Territory.

Mr MALEY: Was it from 2,000 to 3,000 students? It will not be that many, of course, because it was only 0.6%. You gave an exact percentage and to get that you obviously had the numbers. I would like to know how many students.

Ms LAWLER: I am guessing 400 or 500 kids.

Mr MALEY: Could you take that on notice?

Ms LAWLER: Yes.

Question on Notice No 2.11

Mr CHAIR: Member for Nelson, please restate the question for the record.

Mr MALEY: Of the 0.6% growth which was mentioned, what is that in actual student numbers?

Mr CHAIR: Minister, do you accept the question?

Ms LAWLER: Yes.

Mr CHAIR: The question asked by the Member for Nelson has been allocated the number 2.11.

Mrs HERSEY: Given the attendance overall figures that were stated, what was the target percentage of school attendance?

Ms LAWLER: The target is always 100%. Every day we want every kid to go to school. There has been work over the years where we have pushed to get to 80%. If we can get kids to school four days per week that makes a big difference. You may have seen the school signs saying that if you miss one day per week for the whole school year, that is missing one month of school overall. In Budget Paper No 3, the estimates are on page 127.

Mrs HERSEY: Obviously we would like students to have 100% attendance. You said potentially 80%. Darwin was 86.3% and the Top End was 80.2%, but the Barkly was 48.5%. What work is being done to increase and support schools to get more students attending in that region?

Ms LAWLER: We could speak for the next five hours on this ...

Mrs HERSEY: Clearly we do not have five hours, just a brief.

Ms LAWLER: I think you asked the same question last year. It is the role of every person to get kids to school, but it is ultimately the parents' responsibility. Through the Education department's work, we have an engagement strategy.

The top level is a strategic plan. You can read the engagement strategy online. Underneath that every region—that is some of the great work of Saeed, the deputy chief executive—has a target and what they are doing to address attendance. The schools have a plan as well. They are where the rubber hits the road because they have nuanced programs that they know will make a difference to their schools.

Then we have system programs we put in place—whether that is Stars and Clontarf. I have Stars and Clontarf at Driver and Moulden schools. Stars and Clontarf are across the Northern Territory; they are very much focused on getting kids to school.

We have programs such as our re-engagement and flexi-learning programs. Often you will have a child who may not attend school because of high anxiety. They may not feel comfortable about going into a school or may have mental health issues, so we have put in place flexi-learning centres like KFLEC in Katherine. Palmerston also has flexi-learning centres.

Besides the flexi-learning centres, we also have in place re-engagement programs. These are for students for a variety of reasons they may have been in detention or may not be able to cope with the four square walls of a classroom. The Youth Skills Centre in Palmerston is an example of that, as is the Malak Re-engagement Centre. St Joseph's in Alice Springs runs a flexi-learning program.

There are also schools that run programs, such as Yipirinya School with its Sunset School. Tangentyere is also running a Sunset School program with kids in town camps. Centralian Middle School has its Utmenge program for Years 7 to 9. Centralian Senior College has Alice Outcomes to get kids to school.

We have KITES in Alice Springs—Kids in Town Engaged in School—which is for families who come into Alice Springs. Sometimes they may be coming in for medical reasons, court or just to go shopping. How do we get those kids engaged in school? We have KITES at Sadadeen.

There is a multitude of ways, let alone down to having student engagement advisers and officers who work with the schools. Aderyn will be able to go through that. There are hotlines for families. We have social order responsibility teams in Central Australia that look at attendance. We have the strategic patrol network in Alice Springs.

There are so many ways we work to address attendance in our schools. It is only through that hard work that you see improvements.

Ms CHATTERTON: The minister gave a very comprehensive overview of the many pieces. I will talk you through a little of the work that occurs to further enhance the great work occurring in our schools and programs with our engagement officers.

We have a strong regional footprint in each of the six regions across the Northern Territory. In our structure there are 37 frontline student engagement officers who are based throughout the Northern Territory. In addition to that, we have eight school-based engagement officers who work across 11 schools in the Northern Territory.

The work of those school-based engagement officers and student engagement advisers works on a continuum of support. At the heart of that is case management that has student voice and partnership with families and other organisations to understand the barriers that have prevented young people from actively engaging in school and, therefore, what support we need to put in place individual by individual. Our schools are a key part of that. We are seeing some innovative approaches occurring.

We have done work in the development of the quality standards framework for flexible engagement programs. We have a number of partner schools around the Northern Territory and it is our first year of implementing that. It is important that as we create these flexible engagement programs they are still underpinned by great quality teaching and learning. Ultimately for us, engagement is about improved life outcomes for young people.

We also do support to re-engage individual students. Member for Katherine, you would be familiar with the mobile engagement circuit. There is also one in Alice Springs. Our engagement officers are out and about,

connecting in community. We often get referrals from other organisations and then we support and work with the family. Katherine High is actively saying, 'Bring them to us'. Then we want to connect and build relationships with and support young people to re-engage.

We work around key points in the year as well—the start of the school year, down to child by child. Who was enrolled and attending school in Term 4, and where are they in Term 1 of the new school year? Who do we need to be following up and supporting?

We have student engagement plans to support every child. We also have compulsory conference notices, if required. If we have gone through all that work and still require a formal element, we step into that space.

We know and understand from our consultation of the engagement strategy, this is about partnership and relationships, and teaching and learning that is relevant and meaningful for our young people.

Ms LAWLER: There is a compliance area. Compliance support involves enforcement of the NT *Education Act*, in which it is mandatory for school-age children to be enrolled and attending school. There are authorised persons—the student engagement advisers—who can issue compliance and infringement notices.

In Term 1, 2023 there were seven compulsory conference notices and one compliance notice issued. In Term 3, 2022 there were 10 compulsory conference notices and 12 compliance notices issued. Four infringement notices were also issued.

Mr MALEY: In relation to the engagement officers, how many positions are vacant? Are they all full with staff, or are there some engagement officer positions with acting people in them or unfilled?

Ms LAWLER: On any given day there could be vacancies in any role in the public service.

Mr MALEY: I am asking about today.

Ms CHATTERTON: Vacant positions as at 13 June 2023:

- In the Central region, there are no vacancies; we have the full complement of eight
- In the Barkly region, there are no vacancies; we have the full complement of four
- In the Darwin region, our team comprises four positions; there are currently three vacancies and recruitment is being finalised
- In East Arnhem, there are six total positions; we have two vacancies and recruitment is being finalised
- In the Top End, there are six positions; we have three vacancies that are being finalised
- In the Big Rivers region, we have eight positions, with two vacancies being finalised.

That is 37 frontline student engagement staff. That includes our assistant directors as well as student engagement advisers. The assistant directors are the people who go to a lot of the interagency meetings and work in partnership with Territory Families, Housing and Communities, and Police, as well as our advisers. They have a very strong frontline role.

That is 37 staff in total. As at 13 June we have 10 vacancies being recruited to.

Mr MALEY: This will be a difficult question, but how long have those positions been vacant for?

Ms LAWLER: That is a non-question. As soon as they are vacant we advertise straightaway and try to get people into those roles.

Mr MALEY: Can you give me the average time those vacancies are filled?

Ms LAWLER: That is a trivial question with no relevance to anything. Public servants, as soon as there is a vacancy, they have the money and budget and they want to advertise the job and get them filled straightaway.

Mr MALEY: Can we put that on notice?

Ms LAWLER: No, we cannot.

Mr MALEY: What is the procedure?

Mr CHAIR: If the minister does not want to take the question on notice, the question is not taken on notice. That is how that works.

Mrs HERSEY: The national average attendance is 87.8% for Years 1 to 6 and 87.3% for Years 7 to 10. We have spent \$10m on an engagement strategy, yet not one of those overall attendance areas has come up to the national average. You went in comprehensively with a list of things that you were doing to try to raise the attendance, but clearly it is not working.

Ms LAWLER: I am not sure what else needs to be talked about. We have heard that there is growth, which is going the right way. That is what you want to see. There have been improvements in our attendance, which is a great news story for the Territory.

Mr MALEY: Do you think 0.6% growth is successful; is it enough?

Ms LAWLER: As I said probably three questions ago, 100% is what I would love to see in the Northern Territory. I would like to see every single person ...

Mr MALEY: I am not asking that question. My question is whether you think 0.6% growth is enough.

Ms LAWLER: No, 0.6% is not enough. I would like to see 20% or 23%, but how do you get from where you are? You need to take small incremental steps because it is really hard work getting kids to school. I hope that you all understand—Aderyn's full-time position is to work with schools on this—that the absolute focus for our government is to drive student improvement.

I have been on the public record as saying that education—hopefully, all of us in this room agree—is the key to getting out of poverty, addressing the issues of crime and changing the lives of so many Territorians. I know the value and benefit that my children and grandchildren have from a quality education. I want to make sure that every single Territorian across the length and breadth of the Territory goes to school every day and has a great education while in their schools. They can then go on and make those choices in life whether that is going to further education, into jobs or staying in their community. That is the absolute goal and that is the work that we do every day.

I have worked in education for nearly 30 or 40 years. We will continue to work hard. I am really pleased to see a turnaround. Those figures were going backwards for quite a few years. As minister, I am really pleased to see an improvement. Is it enough? It is never enough, but we will keep working on it. I am very grateful for the work that the department is doing.

Mr MALEY: Ms Chatterton, do you think that your unit is resourced enough to do its job? I agree with you, minister, that education is completely important.

Mr CHAIR: Member for Nelson, I remind you of Standing Order 109: Manner and Form of Questions. You are asking for an expression of opinion ...

Ms LAWLER: Of a public servant.

Mr CHAIR: Thanks, minister. Member for Nelson, just let me finish and then you can ask your question in a different way to the minister. I remind you of Standing Order 109. We are not asking for opinions of public servants. That is not a position you should be putting them in. You can ask the question of the minister and we can go from there.

Ms LAWLER: No, I do not think it is enough. That is why I am working with the federal government to get more funding for our schools. Education should ...

Mr MALEY: There is no question. Next question, please?

Mr CHAIR: Member for Katherine, do you want to get to the outputs or are you happy just to continue with whole-of-agency questions?

Mrs HERSEY: I am happy to continue.

I have asked this before, not necessarily in Estimates. Is sorry business taken into attendance? The Barkly has 48.5% overall attendance. When I was out at Borroloola, terribly, there had been 10 deaths in the community up to the end of May. That has a considerable effect on that school. How does the department take that into consideration? What engagement happens with those children, when they move around on sorry business, to potentially keep them engaged in school, no matter what region they are across?

Ms LAWLER: I will pass to Aderyn as she can speak in great depth to this one.

Ms CHATTERTON: We have a range of codes that our schools can utilise when they are recording a young person's attendance at school. There is a code that enables us to capture whether cultural business is occurring. That is our first way as a system to recognise that it is an important part of culture in the Northern Territory and for communities and families.

We have undertaken important work with Menzies that we are finalising to look at a study to understand the trends of mobility within the Northern Territory. It will take us to the important conversations on what it will mean for our program response and policy position et cetera. We know that mobility is part of the pattern of Northern Territory attendance. It may be for cultural reasons; it may be for accessing services. It falls to us to consider what we need to be developing in response.

We have a number of schools that already work in partnerships because they know, through songlines et cetera, that there are key connections between communities and local relationships and the importance of our RSAS partnership work. We share across communities when we believe young people are moving. It is important to have somebody there to greet and welcome them to say, 'Come join us at school'. A number of things are in place to ensure we are responsive to that mobility.

Mrs HERSEY: What is the percentage rate for ATSI students, and what is the target?

Ms LAWLER: You mean, in regard to attendance? Aderyn can provide a response on that.

Mrs HERSEY: Just while they are looking for the attendance rate for ATSI students ...

Mr CHAIR: Sorry, Member for Katherine. Since the Member for Nelson has departed we have lost quorum, so we need to cease the hearing until he comes back in.

We now have quorum.

Ms CHATTERTON: In 2022 the average annual attendance rate for Aboriginal students was 56.4% and non-Aboriginal was 84%.

In relation to a target, as our minister stated before, we want every young person attending every day. We have a headline improvement measure as an agency to increase at least by 10 days for every young person attending school. There was a whole heap of mathematics behind why it is 10 days to ensure we continue to drive the attendance rate forward. Ten days is tangible for young people. As you visit schools around the Territory, you will see examples of a big buff on the wall with photos of young people showing who is in today and who is not, personal goals, classes and whole-of-school celebrations. It is about everybody's business, everybody talking about this and paying attention to it.

Mrs HERSEY: What is the retention rate of students in Years 10 to 12?

Mr CHAIR: Minister, would that be better under Output 9.4, Secondary Years Education? I am not looking to stop you asking questions, but I think you are starting to get into those outputs. Can we move to the first output and then ask your questions as you go through?

Mrs HERSEY: Can I finish this off and then we will go to it?

Mr CHAIR: She will refer that one to 9.4, so ask your next, Member for Katherine.

Mrs HERSEY: Following on from that, how does it compare with the national average?

Mr CHAIR: We will defer that to 9.4. That concludes consideration of agency-related whole-of-government questions on budget and fiscal strategy.

OUTPUT GROUP 9.0 – GOVERNMENT EDUCATION
Output 9.1 – Early Years

Mr CHAIR: The committee will now proceed to Output Group 9.0, Government Education, Output 9.1, Early Years. Shadow minister, do you have any questions?

Mrs HERSEY: Residents in Tennant Creek are concerned that Education has scrapped the early childhood quality adviser position. Is this correct; and, if so, why?

Ms LAWLER: No, I am not aware of that. Sometimes it is about recruiting positions rather than having positions removed. No, that is not the case.

Mr MALEY: Is that position currently vacant?

Ms LAWLER: We will have to check on that.

Mr MALEY: Can we take that one on notice?

Ms LAWLER: Yes, we can take that one on notice.

Question on Notice No 2.12

Mr CHAIR: Member for Katherine, please restate the question for the record.

Mrs HERSEY: Residents in Tennant Creek are concerned that Education has scrapped the early childhood quality adviser position. You said no. Is it vacant; and, if it is, for how long?

Mr CHAIR: Minister, do you accept the question?

Ms LAWLER: Yes.

Mr CHAIR: The question asked by the Member for Katherine has been allocated the number 2.12.

Mrs HERSEY: The Family as First Teachers program is incredibly important. What is the total funding this year for the FaFT program, and how does it compare with last year?

Ms LAWLER: Yes, we all agree that FaFT is a wonderful program. The 2023–24 Budget allocation for FaFT is \$11.9m. It is funding that provides for 55 programs across the Northern Territory. I do not have the figures for last year, but they would be similar if not the same. We can have a look in the budget papers. It is not much at all. In 2022–23 the figure was \$12.024m, and it is now \$11.924m, which is a tiny amount of difference, literally, 0.9 less.

Mr GUYULA: One of the actions of the Education Engagement Strategy is to invest in bilingual education in remote schools. What new resources have been allocated in this budget? What action has been undertaken to achieve this?

Ms LAWLER: In the 2023 calendar year schools will receive \$2.96m towards bilingual education in targeted funds through the school resourcing model. I do not think there has been any additional funding this year specifically. It is around the global school budgets and the schools then choosing what they do with that funding. Nine schools receive targeted funding for bilingual education, and you probably know those—Shepparton, Milingimbi, Maningrida, Yirrkala, Numbulwar, Lajamanu, Willowra, Yuendumu and Areyonga.

If we work with the federal government and get that additional funding, we will see those schools use the money more towards their language and culture programs.

Mr AMIN: A number of workshops were funded for bilingual schools, government schools and independent Catholic schools from South Australia and the NT together. East Arnhem moderation workshops were held in Term 2 and Term 4 last year, so there was a range of workshops to build on that work.

Mrs HERSEY: In 2021, there were 2,936 children in the FaFT program; how many were there in 2022–23?

Ms LAWLER: In Term 1, 2023 there were 1,560 children participating in the FaFT program. That is an increase of 339 children, or 28%, compared with the same time last year.

Mrs HERSEY: Is there any funding for child and family centres in addition to the six that currently exist?

Ms LAWLER: The plans are to continue to roll out the child and family centres. We will work with Territory Families on that.

There are six child and family centres operated by the department. You might understand that there are two models. Six are run by the Education department, and they are what FaFT is part of, as well as childcare and a few other services. The Reform Management Office through Territory Families is responsible for another 11 child and family centres, usually operated by local Aboriginal organisations.

All up, there are 17 child and family centres, but it is our policy position as a government to see more of those centres rolled out across the Territory because we know the benefit to families and young people.

Mrs HERSEY: Do you have an idea of where the extra ones you are working on will be situated?

Ms LAWLER: Gapuwiyak and Wurrumiyanga are the next two. They are under the Reform Management Office. The initial conversations are happening around Utopia, Arlparra, Papunya and Borrooloola. There are two under development and another three where the conversations are starting. It is a program we very much support and will continue to.

Mr GUYULA: Why are the key performance indicator targets in relation to Aboriginal students for the department so low? Do you lower the KPI so that the department is seen to meet its needs and targets? For example, why is the NTCET attainment rate for Aboriginal students targeted at 34% while the non-Aboriginal target is 82%?

Ms LAWLER: That is an important question. We would love those targets to be the same or more so, but they are realistic. We need to continue to work to get Aboriginal students to complete Year 12. There is a review of secondary education occurring now.

Under the Paul Henderson Labor government there was a strong focus on being able to do secondary education in remote communities. Under the CLP government it moved the other way, where the only option was to send all kids to boarding school. That did not work. A discussion paper is on the Have your Say website. The review is to look at how to get more kids successfully through to Year 12.

The targets are not suitable and we want all children in our education system either moving on to higher education, jobs or training. The Territory reality is that we are long way from that, particularly in our remote areas where the majority of kids are Indigenous. There is a lot of work to be done, I agree.

Mr CHAIR: That concludes consideration of Output 9.1.

Output 9.2 – Preschool Education

Mr CHAIR: The committee will consider Output 9.2, Preschool Education. Are there any questions?

Mrs HERSEY: Funding this year for the implementation of the Preschool Reform Agreement has been cut by about \$900,000. What is the reason for this and what impact will this have on the program?

Ms LAWLER: I will pass to Jasmin Aldenhoven, the chief financial officer.

Ms ALDENHOVEN: The \$900,000 in the prior year was actually for a preschool review that is being undertaken at the moment. It was one-off funding for that particular project.

Mr MALEY: Is that review finished?

Ms LAWLER: No. That is important work. We have the preschool review, the secondary review and the review on funding for kids with disability. They are three big pieces of work that tie in with the effective enrolment work.

The preschool area has been moving quickly in Australia. New South Wales and Victoria both committed to full-time—doubling the hours we provide per week for preschool—and looking at three-year-old preschool. At present, we are trialling three-year-old preschool.

Preschool education is a hot topic Australia-wide. Some reviews and reports over the years say that the three-year-old program can make a difference long term to a child's life, particularly for vulnerable kids. That is why we have FaFT.

Mrs HERSEY: In 2021–22 there were about 3,056 children engaged in the 15 hours a week available for preschool education. What is that number for 2022–23?

Ms LAWLER: There were 3,228 NT children aged four or five years old enrolled in a preschool program across 235 service providers in 2022. The numbers are always small in the Territory.

Mr MALEY: In relation to the \$900,000 one-off review, will there be any money in this year's budget for that or was that just for last year and there is more money for this year? Does that \$900,000 cover the whole review however long it takes?

Ms ALDENHOVEN: With the review under way there may be a need to transfer some of that money into the next financial year, but it depends on the invoices coming through. That process occurs around 30 June to make the assessment about moving money between years.

Mr MALEY: There is an opportunity for that \$900,000 review to spend all that money this year and there could be more next year, but you are not sure. Is that right?

Ms ALDENHOVEN: No, it is a one-off amount in the current year. Depending on the timing of completing that, if the invoices relating to that do not come through by the end of June, we can transfer a portion of that into next year, but it is only one \$900,000.

Mr MALEY: Has the review already been completed?

Ms LAWLER: No.

Mr MALEY: When do you expect the review to be completed?

Ms LAWLER: We are hoping that review will be finished very soon ...

Mr MALEY: This financial year?

Ms LAWLER: Probably by the end of this financial year we will see a draft report and we will go from there, but very soon.

Mr MALEY: There is a likelihood that there will be some invoices next financial year, but you are not sure how much.

Ms LAWLER: Not usually. Usually with these things, it goes to tender and they will apply. They would have asked for \$900,000, or that is what the tender would have come—whatever the price is. Whether that payment has milestones in it—some of those payments would have been made—I do not think so. Jasmin has just said no.

Mr MALEY: Will that review be made public?

Ms LAWLER: Yes, it will definitely be made public.

Mrs HERSEY: The trial offering preschool to all three-year-old children was launched at six schools during Term 3, 2021. Is that continuing? Will it be expanded to other schools? Is there language offered as part of that trial in the program?

Ms LAWLER: Languages—as in?

Mrs HERSEY: Like the program in language?

Ms LAWLER: No. The schools are Berry Springs, Braitling, Ludmilla, Malak, Manunda Terrace and Tennant Creek Primary Schools. That trial will extend to 31 December 2023. There might be Indigenous teacher assistants at Tennant Creek, but, no, they are mainstream schools, so no.

Mr CHAIR: Following on that question from the shadow minister on three-year-old preschool, I welcome the announcement of the \$10m for Parap Preschool. Is there any likelihood you see that facility—because it will be a fantastic facility—being expanded in the future to give the capacity with that investment by government?

Ms LAWLER: Yes. That was a positive announcement about Parap Preschool, which is one of our oldest preschools in the Northern Territory. There used to be a model where preschools were built offsite. There were a number of those. It is nice to see. That preschool has educated a lot of Territorians over the years.

In May, as you know, the master plan was completed in consultation with the Parap school community. The plan envisages relocation of Parap primary to the primary school site. The government then committed the \$10m for the new preschool. The existing Parap Preschool is located on Ross Smith Avenue within walking distance to that. We need to see that. We are looking at two 33-child classrooms with the capacity then for 66 preschool students at ground level. That is what you want to see. That is quite a big preschool. It will have a new kitchen, new ablution block—little ones for kids—shade play spaces, outdoor play, equipment storage and parent meeting rooms. It will be a lovely facility at Parap.

We look forward to getting that work under way as quickly as possible. The design work has gone out and the \$10m is in this budget. We hope we will have that finished very soon for the Parap community.

Mr CHAIR: Rossi Architects will do a fantastic job.

Ms LAWLER: Rossi is doing an amazing job. I saw him at the GlENTi playing music on the drums.

Mrs HERSEY: Tennant Creek Primary School is in need of major upgrades or replacement. Are there any future plans for Tennant Creek Primary School?

Ms LAWLER: Yes. I was recently at Tennant Creek Primary School. Like a lot of our schools, it has got to that over-50 age limit. I have been to a few. I am going to the 40th birthday at Moil on Friday.

We have our infrastructure plan. Louise McCormick, the Infrastructure Commissioner, worked on and consulted broadly with departments and there is an infrastructure pipeline, plan and strategy. The infrastructure plan and framework is all available on the Infrastructure Commissioner's website. It plans out the immediate, midterm or the long-term school infrastructure.

Tennant Creek Primary School would join lots of other schools needing work. If it has been identified by the department, it will be on the infrastructure plan. I reckon every school I go to will tell me that they need some money spent on upgrades to their school.

The good one for you is the \$9.7m for a STEAM centre in Katherine. We are getting a new boarding facility in Tennant Creek, so that is a positive one.

Mrs HERSEY: Yes, all schools would like funding but given that 48.5% overall is the attendance in the Barkly, do you know where their upgrades sit in that infrastructure plan? The Member for Barkly is always championing a school bus service for Tennant Creek; is that on the horizon?

Ms LAWLER: Yes. You asked a number of questions. First of all, the school bus service will be up and running for Term 3. I should not make that announcement without the Member for Barkly quickly doing a Facebook post; I am sure he will be doing one right now. There has been a school bus service. The issue is more about it being centrally funded. The schools have always had pickups and things like that in Tennant Creek. This is having it more centrally funded like it is in Alice Springs or Katherine.

In relation to infrastructure in the Barkly, I will not go through every school. There has been a large number of upgrades. Alekarenge had some new transportables. All the schools through the Building Better Schools have got \$300,000. There have been lots of upgrades around the Barkly, but you do not want me to read them all out. Alpurrurulam, Alekarenge, Canteen Creek, Barunga—there have been large amounts of money spent on infrastructure throughout our schools. The best thing is to have a look at that plan.

Mrs HERSEY: You mentioned Building Better Schools. Have all schools received that funding?

Ms LAWLER: Yes. It probably is also a DIPL question, but I think we are down to the last handful of about six. I have the brief in DIPL. We can leave that one for DIPL. We are down to seven schools finalising delivery: Alpururulam in August; Borroloola is still to be done; Minyerri, July; Mutitjulu, August; Ngukurr, July; Pigeon Hole is tied up with the floods; and there is still work for Robinson River. Some of the schools have not been 100% sure of what they want. Other reasons are because the school will put some money in themselves because the envelope did not fit the \$300,000. Seven schools are still left to go, so not many.

Mr MALEY: Is that the first round or second round of funding?

Ms LAWLER: There is only one.

Mr MALEY: My notes say that in 2016 it was released and then in March 2018 a second round was released to improve facilities. Is that not correct?

Ms LAWLER: No, it was a 2016 election commitment.

Mr MALEY: Alekarenge has its \$300,000. Is that correct?

Ms LAWLER: I just read that. Alekarenge is completed. It upgraded the preschool outdoor play area, which was completed in December last year for \$287,128.

Mrs HERSEY: Manunda Terrace Primary School is the recipient of a \$400,000 Safer Communities grant for security upgrades. What are they doing there?

Ms LAWLER: I was at Manunda Terrace probably a week ago. It is fencing and security screens. There are security screens being put on the school. They did tell me that.

Mr CHAIR: That concludes consideration of Output 9.2.

Output 9.3 – Primary Years Education

Mr CHAIR: The committee will now consider Output 9.3, Primary Years Education. Are there any questions?

Mrs HERSEY: How many teachers are at Taminmin College, broken down by middle and senior school, as of Term 2, 2023?

Ms LAWLER: Staffing is a matter for the schools. The CLP brought in the global school budget. The Education department now gives the money to the schools. It is up to the schools how they spend their dollar. If anyone has messaged you and has a complaint about Taminmin staffing, that is a matter for the school board and the principal. They should talk to the school.

As a government, we give the Education department money. The Education department allocates that money on a needs-based model to the school. How the school makes up their staffing is up to them. If they want one principal, two or four assistant principals, 20 teachers and three teacher assistants, that is up to them. When I was a principal, we had our student numbers and they would tell us, 'You get one principal, one AP, three senior teachers and 10 classroom teachers'. Those days are over. It is up to Taminmin to work out its staffing.

Mr MALEY: I have a question about high schools in the rural area. Taminmin College is the only public school out there and it is bursting at the seams. Are there any plans for a new high school in the rural area?

Ms LAWLER: Yes, there have been conversations on that. We will just have to wait and see. I also understand the non-government situation. MacKillop and Good Shepherd are large. Taminmin is obviously full. When the time is right, those announcements will be made.

Mr MALEY: Can you expand on what is meant by 'conversations'? Have you put it in a budget?

Ms LAWLER: No. It is in the infrastructure plan that there will be a middle school in that area. You know what, Gerard? That might be a nice election commitment by you.

Mr CHAIR: Minister and Member for Nelson, we are in Output 9.3, Primary Years Education, not secondary.

Mr MALEY: I will ask that question in 9.4.

Mr CHAIR: That concludes consideration of Output 9.3.

Output 9.4 – Secondary Years Education

Mr CHAIR: The committee will now consider Output 9.4, Secondary Years Education. Are there any questions?

Mr MALEY: I am just trying to work out a time frame for a potential middle school in the rural area. Is it one year, five years, 10 years, 15 years or 20 years?

Ms LAWLER: You would have to look at the infrastructure plan for that. There are no immediate plans.

Mr MALEY: What does 'no immediate plans' mean?

Ms LAWLER: It means no-one is doing the design work or looking at land. It is a good election commitment for you, Gerard.

Mrs HERSEY: How many school counsellors are currently employed at the Education department?

Ms LAWLER: There are 30 counsellors as part of the Wellbeing and Inclusion team.

Mrs HERSEY: How does that compare with last year?

Ms LAWLER: It is five more than last year.

Mrs HERSEY: Are there any positions vacant? Are you advertising for any more?

Ms LAWLER: Yes. There are vacancies, and we are always advertising. We have a major campaign on at the moment to get more allied health professionals into our schools. We all understand that for OTs, child psychologists and social workers, who are the counsellors, there is a shortage around Australia. If anybody out there is listening and you are thinking about what profession you want to do, it is a great job working in our schools as a counsellor. Yes, we have a national campaign to recruit more.

I will pass to the chief executive to add anything more.

Mrs HERSEY: How many are vacant? How many are you advertising for?

Ms WESTON: I will hand to Aderyn Chatterton because she will have the detail and know exactly where we are up to with recruitment.

Ms CHATTERTON: We are in the midst of a recruitment campaign. As at 8 June we have seven vacancies, but we are actively recruiting to fill them. When I say recruiting, we have been extremely comprehensive. It has been a national campaign for a wide range, not just school counsellors, but for speech therapists, occupational therapists, psychologists, specialist advisory teachers, school counsellors and practice leaders. We have had them on job boards right around the country, Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn, our own Education NT Facebook and our Teach in the Territory webpage. We have a rolling expressions of interest and we are featuring our amazing talented people who are already working in the Territory to speak to the importance of the work that they are doing.

Mrs HERSEY: How many of those counsellors are on site at one school permanently?

Ms LAWLER: All those counsellors will be working from schools.

Mrs HERSEY: Are all 30 actually in schools?

Ms LAWLER: Yes, that is the role. We want counsellors in schools. We know their work in schools is valuable. Yes, it is important to make sure that they are in schools.

Mrs HERSEY: Will none of them be transitioned to Mitchell Street as per the announcement made by the department?

Ms CHATTERTON: The Department of Education never made an announcement that we were bringing school counsellors into the Mitchell Centre. They need to be in our schools working with the young people their role is designed to support. We have 13 positions based in our larger middle and senior secondary schools, and the other 17 we referred to in the total pool of 30 work in multiple schools.

We just heard a great news story of our team that supports Gunbalanya. We have school counsellors who go across the Northern Territory and they work in partnership. Our schools get to determine the service requests and need. Our principal drives that, articulates what they are seeing in their own school and says that this is the kind of support they would like for our young people to build on the work already occurring.

Mrs HERSEY: What schools across the Territory are the 30 counsellors at?

Ms LAWLER: They are at Darwin High School, Darwin Middle, Nightcliff Middle, Casuarina Senior College, Dripstone Middle, Sanderson Middle, Palmerston College, Taminmin College, Shepherdson College, Katherine High, Centralian Middle and Centralian Senior College.

Mrs HERSEY: Are any of those counsellors shared across schools?

Ms CHATTERTON: Each of those schools the minister just listed has a school counsellor allocated. Over the past few months we wanted to ensure equitable access to all our schools. As we have had vacancies and been recruiting, we have been ensuring that we are distributing our resources. You may have one counsellor who is normally at a school, say for four days a week because the fifth day they are undertaking important professional practice learning and keeping up with their professional standards. Maybe one person is normally at one school four days a week and we may require them to be based at another school for three days while we continue to fill the recruitment.

The other important piece in the agency is that any school across the Northern Territory, at any time, can ring or email a fully qualified social worker or counsellor and say, 'I have this young person I am concerned about', and they can discuss it and get advice and guidance. In that situation we can also pivot resources if we need to, to be where our schools need us to be.

Mrs HERSEY: Given that counsellors are an integral part of a school community in building relationships with a student to their school counsellor, how will that work if counsellors are moving around from school to school?

Ms LAWLER: No, they are only moving if there is a vacancy. I think Nightcliff Middle School did not have a counsellor, so there was a counsellor who filled in for one day a week.

We also need to understand the counsellors are just part of the equation we have in schools. We have school nurses, our school-based constables or police officers ...

Ms PURICK: I like that comment, minister—school-based constables.

Ms LAWLER: Yes, constables or auxiliaries.

Also, the schools need to have a wellbeing program. When I was at Tennant Creek High School recently, I saw the Be You program, which is a lovely program that is run under Beyond Blue. It makes sure we have a whole-school program. It is all very well having a counsellor, but the counsellors are often at the pointy end. You need to have the whole school addressing things like bullying, student wellbeing and accepting the diversity in our schools—kids with disability and kids from multicultural backgrounds. How do you build a school that is much more accepting of diversity so that we do not see kids being bullied or picked on—things that would contribute to mental health issues? That is when you sometimes need counsellors. Counsellors step in when we have kids feeling like they do not belong and are not connected to their school. It is important.

It was lovely to meet the facilitator from Beyond Blue who was working at Tennant Creek High School and Tennant Creek Primary School. It is about a whole-school program. A school that has a whole-school program about wellbeing, accepting all kids, not allowing any bullying and all those sorts of things is where we need to start. Counsellors are part of that equation.

The other side is if your child is mentally unwell, the next step is to refer them to a GP who then refers them to a child psychiatrist or child psychologist. That work cannot be done by a school counsellor. The school counsellor does not necessarily have the time or the ability to provide medication. If a child is critically

mentally unwell, there is that next step and the role of the counsellor is to talk to the parents and urge the parents to take that child for the next step.

People are focusing on counsellors, but counsellors are only one little part of this big equation about wellbeing in schools.

Ms PURICK: On the school counsellors, I have been quite open about not being comfortable with the new model of triage and allocating across schools. I want to get some clarity about the new model. Can you confirm, yes or no, that the student will need to fill in a formal request to see a counsellor through the school? Is the permission of the parent required for a child under 16 years of age to see a counsellor?

Ms LAWLER: We are getting into important questions here. I will pass to Aderyn because I would hate to say something that was not accurate.

Ms CHATTERTON: We need to be clear, first and foremost, that no child will be turned away from receiving support. We are there to ensure that our counsellors are one part of a team that wraps around our young people.

School counsellors are the term we know them by, but they are qualified social workers and psychologists. In connecting with that young person, understanding what the needs are, listening to where that young person is at and what is concerning them, they will use their professional judgement and determine whether this needs to be an ongoing relationship, a support network as such. If that is required, best practice says that it is important to partner with families. We are having a conversation ...

Ms PURICK: The child will need consent if they are under 16 years?

Ms CHATTERTON: We will ...

Ms PURICK: What if the child has been beaten up by their parents? How will they get consent to see a counsellor if they have come from a dysfunctional family? That is my concern.

Ms CHATTERTON: I reassure you that the best interests of the child is at the centre of everything; that is what the profession is about and everything that drives their work. They will seek to understand the factors. A young person may say, 'I am not comfortable. I do not want you talking to my parents about this.' The counsellor would work through that. It may be that they then need to link with other agencies to support the young person. We need to remember that this work can be done in a way that respects the confidentiality of the young person. The professional judgement of these highly trained and qualified people balance the best interests of the child with their professional obligations and a family-centred approach. We recognise there are circumstances where we will need to differentiate.

Mr CHAIR: Darwin High School funds its own counsellor as well as a Department of Education-funded counsellor. How is that process different, and will it create barriers internally?

Ms CHATTERTON: We are aware that a growing number of schools are doing this. Every school can determine how they allocate their school resourcing funding. Schools are making decisions to employ not just school counsellors, but other allied health services in the school. We provide advice and guidance to those schools. We ensure our school principals are aware of professional standards and practices in place.

We have stood up our new structure, which is about a multidisciplinary team. We are in consultation and conversations about the operating models. We are talking directly with principals, and they are the kind of questions we will work through together. We are also talking directly with our workforce, the Youth Voice Peak Group and young people about the matters from their perspective and the factors of their wellbeing that we need to be mindful of as we undertake this work.

Mrs HERSEY: You said that Katherine High School has a counsellor, yet it has a position vacant for a counsellor. Has that been filled recently?

Ms LAWLER: I gave a list of the schools that have a counsellor allocated. Aderyn talked about the vacancies and can give an update on Katherine.

Ms CHATTERTON: It is true that currently Katherine High School's ongoing position is vacant and being recruited in the pool that is occurring at the moment. However, while we have had that vacancy there is a time allocation of two days per week to cover that position in the school, and they have a strong relationship with

our local senior leader of the SWIPS team. Nick knows to pick up the phone and there is guaranteed support there.

Mrs HERSEY: Is that person on the phone or in the community?

Ms CHATTERTON: They are allocated and can be there.

Mrs HERSEY: Are they in the department in Katherine?

Ms CHATTERTON: Yes.

Ms LAWLER: They are in the department in the Katherine regional office, but go two days per week to Katherine High School.

Mrs HERSEY: Do they relocate to the school two days per week or only if they are needed by a student?

Ms CHATTERTON: They have a time allocation of two days per week to cover while that person is being recruited. It is from the existing pool of Big Rivers locally based counsellors.

Mrs HERSEY: How many school nurses are currently employed at the Education department?

Ms LAWLER: You will have to get that information from Health. The Minister for Health will be here on Monday.

Mrs HERSEY: Moving on to police constables in schools, a review was done some time ago. How many schools have police constables?

Ms LAWLER: We remind you that the CLP got rid of school-based constables ...

Mrs HERSEY: I am asking how many there are, minister; I am not after your preamble.

Ms LAWLER: There are 15 school-based officer positions in the program since 2021, comprising a mix of remotely based constables and specialist school-based police auxiliaries.

Do you want the names of the schools?

Mrs HERSEY: No. How does that compare with last year?

Ms LAWLER: It is the same. Casuarina Senior College, Centralian Middle—all the big ones—Centralian Senior, Darwin High, Darwin Middle, Dripstone Middle, Katherine High, Nhulunbuy High, Nightcliff Middle, Palmerston College, Sanderson Middle, Taminmin College and Tennant Creek High.

Ms PURICK: How many are police constables in what schools? How many are police auxiliaries in what schools? There is a big difference.

Ms LAWLER: The auxiliaries are in our urban schools and the constables are in the ones that are beyond Taminmin. Tennant Creek High, Nhulunbuy High, Katherine High, Centralian Senior and Centralian Middle have constables. The others have auxiliaries.

Mrs HERSEY: Are any of those positions vacant at the moment?

Ms LAWLER: No, they are not vacant.

Mrs HERSEY: Are they full-time or part-time?

Ms LAWLER: They are full-time positions.

Ms PURICK: Can you advise how much money the Department of Education gives to NT Police to fund these positions?

Ms LAWLER: Yes. Education allocates \$3m to Police for funding of the school-based constables.

Mrs HERSEY: The National School Reform Agreement was due to expire this year but has been extended by 12 months to December 2024. Do you believe that government schools are being short-changed, as some have suggested?

Ms LAWLER: I am not sure what you mean by short-changed. The agreement holds from the agreement that was done under the Coalition government. That was under Turnbull. I was around when Birmingham got the boot because he was going to give us more funding basically. The Catholics in New South Wales all screamed and yelled, so Turnbull got rid of him and put in Tehan.

I am working hard with Jason Clare to make sure we can get full funding for our schools in the Northern Territory. We have seen that additional \$40m that has gone into Central Australia. Jason Clare has been very positive in the things he has said. He meets with me and the Principals' Association. I think he has met with COGSO through its national body, as well as the unions. He has been very much focused on full funding for all our schools. It will be a positive day when we see that. We have already seen some positive news for Alice Springs. We will continue to fight with that.

We are a long way from equity in education in Australia. The day that kids in Papunya and Peppimenarti and places like that have the same amount of funding as a private school like Knox College or Geelong Grammar will be the day we have equity in education. That is one of the key things I have been fighting for as Education minister.

Mrs HERSEY: The Productivity Commission has concluded that the NSRA has done little so far to improve student outcomes. How will you ensure that, particularly with the new agreement in 2025, the Territory improves student outcomes?

Ms LAWLER: That is probably more than a \$64m question; it is the whole question of education in Australia. Our results in education in Australia should be better. There are things like PISA, TIMSS and our assessments that are done that compare us with the rest of the world. They are done for kids at 15 years of age. Our results in Australia have not been where they should be, and there is a lot of research on how we can change that. One key thing is three-year-old preschool.

Our results are the same. The average white, middle-class kid with English as a first language does well in education in Australia. They talk about the long tail. It is often about socioeconomic status; remote and regional areas do not do as well in education in Australia. Every state and territory pushes hard to drive improvements in their education system.

New South Wales and Victoria moved towards three-year-old preschool. They are not just doing that because they want to; they do not want to spend hundreds of millions of dollars more. It is about driving improvements and productivity. If we have more Australians coming out of schooling able to read and write, being citizens of the 21st century and able to get into a job, that is what we want to see. We do not want a whole population in Australia that comes out of 12 years of education struggling to read and write.

The Productivity Commission is spot on. It is the same with effective enrolments; if we are putting more money into schools, we want to see better results. I am sure that through the national agreement they will push to see improvements in our results.

There is some good news in the Territory. Our NAPLAN results have achieved some strong gains, ranking first for growth in four years for reading in the Years 3 to 7 cohort. In the Years 5 to 9 cohort, the four-year gains are in reading, spelling, grammar, punctuation and numeracy. There are six-year gains for reading, spelling, grammar, punctuation in Years 3 to 9. We ranked second in writing and numeracy. The NT ranked in the top two jurisdictions for six-year cohort gains. In the six years from Years 3 to 9, we have seen some strong gains. We are seeing improvements in education in the Territory.

Australia also needs to work on improving education, but that is everybody's focus. If the federal government gives us more money, it will want to see what we do with that money.

Mrs HERSEY: The special education unit at Palmerston College is at capacity. Are there any plans to expand this unit?

Ms LAWLER: Yes, there are. I think when Paul Henderson was Chief Minister and Education minister, he had a strong plan to improve special needs in the Northern Territory. Nemaarluk got a new school in Alawa; Henbury got a brand-new school; Forrest Parade is a new school; Acacia was upgraded; and Kintore Street was also upgraded.

The special education unit at Palmerston is full. I occasionally visit, as it is in my electorate. I have a strong interest in kids with additional needs.

There are plans to look at an additional secondary for special needs. Some of the work we are doing in Holtze and Kowandi—there are some big land releases in those areas—is looking at where would be the best place for a secondary provision for special needs in Palmerston.

Mrs HERSEY: I go back to the school counsellors. You said that was not a direction from the department.

Ms LAWLER: What was that?

Mrs HERSEY: For the school counsellors to be centralised to the Mitchell Centre.

Ms LAWLER: They are not. We have been clear that they are not.

Mrs HERSEY: There was a direction here. It was in the paper.

Ms LAWLER: The *NT News* ...

Mrs HERSEY: Five hundred people signed a petition launched by Casuarina Senior College against the new model. Under the model, all school counsellors were to operate under the Mitchell Centre.

Ms LAWLER: That is incorrect. I do not know why you believe what is in the newspaper when the chief executive, the actual department head responsible for that, has just told you clearly what the model is.

I will pass to the chief executive officer. Throw away your newspaper article; it is incorrect. Listen to the chief executive.

Ms WESTON: We saw matters escalate because we had been talking with our schools about the new model. You heard from Aderyn Chatterton that we are still working on how to make the new model more efficient.

We have confirmed that the secondary and middle schools with school counsellors will have them stay in those schools, but our priority is to respond to the needs of all students in the Territory. To do that at a time when access to allied health staff is tight, we have to come up with a way to make sure that every student and school that need support has access to that support.

We are having a conversation with schools and our workforce about how we can design a model that will work. Other jurisdictions have central pools of staff, but I can be clear that for our middle and secondary schools that have an allocated a counsellor, they will stay within the school. We will move them around so that we can cover long service leave and recruitment because our priority is to make sure that students have access to supports when they have some of these issues going on around wellbeing. It is a student-centric, place-based responsive model we are trying to work with our schools and our staff to design.

We are trying to make sure, too, that it sits with the standards that are required by their profession. If you are a social worker or a school counsellor, you have standards, so we have to make sure that we do that.

You heard Aderyn talk about the good practice of being family centred, but also understanding that in some instances students will need to have confidential conversations. We may need to refer to other agencies and other health professionals who do the more intensive work.

I flag that the intention is very much to respond to student needs and we do see more incidents and needs in primary school as well as secondary school. Our secondary schools are large enough to require that allocation of one person in the school and we are not moving away from that model. We are trying to respond to the needs across the whole Territory.

Ms LAWLER: One thing I have had conversations with this chief executive about is if this recruitment does not give us the numbers that we want, we will look to possibly a model of scholarships and trying to grow our own. In the past we have given scholarships to Aboriginal students to become teachers when we need more, and special education teachers as well. It is really hard to get school counsellors because psych and social work degrees are not the trendy degrees that they used to be. People want to do IT or marketing and communications, so I have said to Karen that if this round of recruitment cannot throw up more people, we need to look at long-term scholarships or other options to get more counsellors in the Territory.

Mr CHAIR: Just before we continue, Member for Katherine, you have gone back to a question that was closed. If you have more questions related to school-based constables, be cognisant of time.

Mrs HERSEY: Has there been a change in the department? It goes on to report that the Department of Education has implemented a new model that is like a triage model. Was there some thought to doing that?

Ms LAWLER: I think that somehow there has been misinformation, because I had people asking me whether all the psychologists and counsellors will be sitting in the Mitchell Centre waiting for a phone call from a school, then racing out there. No, that is not what we want.

I read out a list of schools. A school counsellor will be at Darwin High School. It obviously has strong needs. It has used some of its own money and staffing budget to make sure that it has a second counsellor. They are in that school. If a student needs support, they will go see the counsellor.

As Aderyn said, if that young person is under 16, there will need to be conversations with that child about getting permission from their parents, particularly if it is for the long term. I have two children who are teenagers; sometimes the issues that they will come to me about are small and can be addressed with a couple of conversations—‘This person does not like me; they are not my friend anymore. I am not happy.’ If the counsellor identifies a long-term issue, they will ask to meet with their parents or refer them to other services.

Mrs HERSEY: We were talking about the special education unit at Palmerston College. Has any money been set aside in the budget?

Ms LAWLER: No.

Mrs HERSEY: What are the consequences or services provided for high school students who misbehave or commit offences outside of school? For instance, recently we have seen fighting and carrying on in Casuarina. If a child is arrested for fighting in Casuarina, what is the school response to that event?

Ms LAWLER: That is outside of school hours. It is for the parents and police.

Mrs HERSEY: Thank you for \$9.7m, which is well received in the Katherine region, for the Katherine High School. It is exciting. The teachers and students are excited about that. It is not before time. It is old infrastructure. What exactly will be delivered, and what is the completion date for the project?

Ms LAWLER: The \$9.7m for the new STEAM facility will repurpose block P and R. You have probably had a look. I had a look there. It is funny seeing the old Bunsen burners. It will support contemporary pedagogy by providing three science labs, three art studios and an art gallery. I had conversations with Nick Lovering and it was important to him for kids to display their art if they want to go into those sorts of careers. There is a music room and four practice areas, seven general learning areas and teacher support spaces.

DIPL has worked with the department and Katherine High School to progress the design of the project during 2021–22 and 2022–23. It is all funded by the Northern Territory Government. The budget is with DIPL. We will get moving on that as soon as possible in the new financial year. It will be out to tender in August.

Mrs HERSEY: Given that it will go to tender in August, is there a completion date?

Ms LAWLER: Hopefully by the end of 2024. These are questions for DIPL.

Mr CHAIR: Member for Katherine, we can go through this in the DIPL output. I have some about Parap Preschool, too.

Mrs HERSEY: I will ask that in DIPL.

The Leaders of Tomorrow program commenced in 2021, with 20 participants from seven schools. How many participants are there currently?

Ms LAWLER: There are 28. It is a great program.

Mrs HERSEY: What were the outcomes for these students? Did they achieve job placements or go onto further educational opportunities?

Ms LAWLER: I will pass to Aderyn to give some details.

Ms CHATTERTON: There have been great news stories. One of our graduates last year from East Arnhem is interstate studying. She aspired to psychology and wants to return and be part of allied health. I spoke to her about our recruitment in the future.

It is a rolling program. Just yesterday I saw a new application for a young person from Darwin who we are excited about. We are continually promoting it, and we will track our graduates. We support them by linking them up with universities, so we can start to have conversations and give them oversight of the opportunities.

There is a group going to Canberra in a few months through a partnership with the Defence force. The program is tailored to the interests and aspirations of the young people, but the focus of this group this year is to engage in a conversation with the department about how we can continue to build on attendance and engagement. It will be great to work with them in that space.

Mrs HERSEY: The NT Learning Commission has its roots in Katherine but has now been expanded to 27 schools. What funding applies to this program and how many students participated last year?

Ms LAWLER: The NT Learning Commission is a fabulous program. It was Casuarina Street and I think I was there for the very first launch of it.

Since its inception in 2016, it has grown from a group of seven schools to now representing over half of all Territorians in public schools. It is now in 40 schools across four of the six regions. About 17,000 students are represented in the Learning Commission.

I do not have a figure for that budget separately. It is part of our youth engagement and Youth Voice. I do not have a separate budget figure for that. It is part of the schools' own work. The schools do their program as part of their schoolwork, so it would not be expensive.

Mrs HERSEY: Are you saying that comes out of the school budgets?

Ms LAWLER: There would be some central money that would employ the facilitator, but most of the work is done at the school level. As you know, primary school kids get together to work on their project and that is within their teaching and learning—within the school's own money.

When they come to Darwin or Katherine, they would take their own buses or pay for a bus out of the school's budget. There would be a small amount of money through the facilitators; I think that would be about it.

Mrs HERSEY: How many students in total achieved an NTCET in 2022–23, and what percentage of those students were Aboriginal?

Ms LAWLER: A total of 1,357 students completed an NTCET in 2022, which is a completion rate of 79% of Year 12 students. Of those, 231 identified as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. This was an increase of 14 compared with the previous year.

Mrs HERSEY: What is the funding for the Get SET program, and how many school leavers participated in 2022–23?

Ms LAWLER: I will pass to the chief executive.

Ms WESTON: That program started during COVID. Funding was initially available for one year. We do not have an update. We extended the program last year, but the program is no longer run by the department. The Leaders of Tomorrow is where our focus is at this time.

Mr CHAIR: That concludes questions on Output 9.4.

Output 9.5 – International Education

No questions.

Output 9.6 – Higher Education

No questions.

OUTPUT GROUP 10.0 – NON-GOVERNMENT EDUCATION
Output 10.1 – Primary Years Education
Output 10.2 – Secondary Years Education

No questions.

OUTPUT GROUP 11.0 – CORPORATE AND SHARED SERVICES
Output 11.1 – Corporate and Governance

Mr CHAIR: The committee will now consider questions on Output Group 11.0, Corporate and Shared Services, Output 11.1, Corporate and Governance.

Mr MALEY: When your executives have the vehicles, are they allowed to take them interstate as part of their ...

Ms LAWLER: Yes, with the permission of the CEO.

Mr MALEY: What about their fuel cards?

Ms LAWLER: Yes, they can use their fuel card. No? I will pass to Susan Bowden.

Ms BOWDEN: Executives can only use the fuel cards within the Northern Territory. Once they cross the border they are expected to cover their own fuel costs.

Mr CHAIR: That completes the questions on Output 11.1.

Output 11.2 – Shared Services Received

No questions.

Mr CHAIR: That concludes consideration of outputs relating to the Department of Education. On behalf of the committee, I thank the department officers for providing their advice to the minister and all the preparation that went in previously.

Ms LAWLER: I thank Karen Weston, the Chief Executive Officer; Susan Bowden and Saeed Amin, the deputies; and Jasmin and Aderyn for their time they have put into this. I also thank the Education people who I know are watching who prepared the folders. Thank you for all your work. It is greatly appreciated.

Mr CHAIR: The committee will now take a five-minute break before we consider outputs relating to the Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Logistics.

The committee suspended.

INFRASTRUCTURE, PLANNING AND LOGISTICS

TERRITORY DEVELOPMENT

DEPARTMENT OF INFRASTRUCTURE, PLANNING AND LOGISTICS

Mr CHAIR: Welcome, everyone. Thanks for waiting and I apologise that it has taken until this time to get to this. Minister, I invite you to introduce the officials accompanying you and to make an opening statement, if you wish.

Ms LAWLER: It is a pleasure to be here with the DIPL executive. I have Louise McCormick, acting Chief Executive who is also the Infrastructure Commissioner; Leah Clifford, Deputy Chief Executive Officer; Claire Brown, General Manager for Transport and Civil Services; Fotis Papadakis, Chief Financial Officer; and Adam Walding, General Manager of Infrastructure Investment and Contracts. There is a great team of people who are excited to answer questions on infrastructure in the Territory.

I will not make an opening statement, because we are running short on time. We can get straight into it.

Agency-Related Whole-of-Government Questions on Budget and Fiscal Strategy

Mr CHAIR: The committee will now consider the estimates for proposed expenditure pertaining to the Appropriation (2023–2024) Bill as it relates to the Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Logistics. Are there any agency-related whole-of-government questions?

Mr MALEY: I start with questions on the youth justice centre at Holtze. Can you tell me what the budget is at the moment, noting that the original budget was \$55.1m?

Ms LAWLER: That has been a substantial build, which we are excited about. It is well overdue. We all understand the original site chosen by government was not accepted by the public. We moved to the Holtze site. During that time we have extended the numbers, and they have increased for the rooms. It is now an additional 10 beds. The total expenditure to 31 March 2023 is \$91m. I will pass to Adam Walding to give a run-down of the project.

Mr WALDING: The project is due for completion at the end of first quarter 2024. It has been a difficult project run over COVID. We had supply issues and shortage of tradespeople to help keep things moving. We have also had design issues. The current contract value is commercial-in-confidence because we are still negotiating outcomes with the contractor we are doing works on site with.

Mr MALEY: It has gone from \$55m to \$91m and is it still another six months from completion?

Mr WALDING: Yes. We will do a staged handover with youth justice. The minister for youth justice said the other week in the media that they commence on site on 1 July. We will complete the construction work from our side, do a staged handover and then they will facilitate and transition across.

Mr MALEY: When do you think it will be open for use?

Mr WALDING: The minister for youth justice said it would be mid-next year.

Mr MALEY: The minister explained that it has gone up by 10 beds; what is the total number of beds in that facility?

Ms LAWLER: It will have capacity for 46 youths and will provide a modern fit for the completely facility. It will deliver a new therapeutic model of care. From the initial drawings, it has gone up to 46 youths who will be housed there.

Mr MALEY: Can you explain why it has increased so much in value for a minimum of 10 beds?

Ms LAWLER: Adam Walding just gave you a run-down. There have been cost increases. It has been a difficult build during COVID. Construction material costs have gone up. The scope has increased. It is a complex build, and the costs have increased. Yes, we are continuing to negotiate with the builder on that to make sure we keep costs to a minimum.

Mr CHAIR: Has the location change had an increase to it, minister, from Pinelands to ...

Ms LAWLER: No, that was the design work earlier on. It is one of those builds that is not a usual build. Builders build schools often, but they do not build youth justice facilities in the Northern Territory often.

We have done the work in Darwin and the upgrades in Alice Springs. I have been there. I presume at some stage there will be some sort of open day. You will get to see it. We will not go into that because we do not want anybody trying to break out. It is a solid build—would be the word.

Mrs LAMBLEY: What is the final cost of it?

Ms LAWLER: We are not giving that final cost at this stage because the build is still not completed. We will give the final cost when the build is complete.

Mrs LAMBLEY: How much was allocated to it originally?

Ms LAWLER: The original allocation was ...

Mr MALEY: It was \$55.1m.

Ms LAWLER: It then went up to \$90m. The final cost is ...

Mr MALEY: I want to take you to a different subject now, which is the Howard Springs camp and the flood evacuation. Can you explain the damage you saw when you went on your tour?

Ms LAWLER: The damages I saw were mainly broken windows. I have been there probably three times over the course of the evacuation. The first time was to see the evacuees. The second time was to have a look at the site and to thank the staff.

I say up-front thank you to the DIPL staff who are there. There are four staff there day in, day out. We have to talk about that. The work they do did not just happen when the flood victims went there. There are staff at that site ongoing. They were there during COVID. Even in between times, they have continued to maintain that site. Once the flood victims were there, they continued to work there.

I saw mainly broken, boarded-up windows. There were small windows at the back—like toilet and bathroom windows—that had not broken because I guess they had stronger glass on them. They were just shattered. I saw windows boarded up throughout the facility. That was pretty much it.

I walked through it when the vast majority of people had gone, and the place was being cleaned and tidied up.

Mr MALEY: What is the damage bill so far?

Ms LAWLER: There are multiple layers to go through on that. First and foremost, the conversations we have heard so far—we have to be careful because it is not CNR, but C&R Constructions won the \$27,000 tender to do the condition assessment. That is a well-known Territory company that built the Palmerston Fire Station.

We have also seen a tender go out for mattresses. That was a contract to replace 265 king single mattresses. That went to SlumberCorp Australasia NT, a local Territory company. That mattress replacement was also ongoing work that needed to be done, so DIPL staff keep mattresses in storage. That was one tender that went out.

Some money went towards fire extinguishers. To 31 May this year there was \$11,448.25 for fire extinguishers. There were fire extinguishers let off by people, so they needed to be replaced. I did not see that damage as it had been cleaned up, but the replacement of fire extinguishers spend is to 31 May.

Mr MALEY: You said fire extinguishers, then you said replacement. Is the total \$11,400 or is there a separate figure?

Ms LAWLER: No. The replacement of fire extinguishers is \$11,448.25.

There was also blocked sewerage and plumbing issues that needed to be addressed to the value of \$35,159.26.

There was a contract for stage one of the window replacement and the contract was awarded to Easy Glass. The works are due for completion on 30 June. That was a single select tender for stage one of window replacements to the value of \$45,160 to 31 May.

Mr MALEY: How many windows is that for?

Ms LAWLER: I think it was for about 100 windows.

Mr MALEY: Can you give us a more accurate figure than 'about'?

Ms LAWLER: I just looked at Adam; it is about 100 windows. That was the first tender and it was also a spend to 31 May.

There were also building repairs, general labour and upgrades for a total of \$79,139.77 to 31 May.

In all, it was sewerage, fire extinguishers, building repairs, general labour, mattresses, the condition assessment and the first lot of windows. There is now work that will come out of the C&R Constructions

assessment that will include more costs and the tender for stage two of the window repairs. We have been very clear there were 673 windows broken and 100 are completed, so the remaining 573 will be replaced at an additional cost. All up to 31 May, the expense to government is \$288,164.55.

I must emphasise that is not money the Northern Territory Government wants to spend, but when you have people who need to be evacuated, governments have to do that work and put people in accommodation. Initially we were looking at Foskey Pavilion. The decision changed very quickly when the emergency management team realised the extent of the damage at Pigeon Hole, Kalkarindji, Daguragu and Yarralin. The decision was made that the people had to go to the accommodation at Howard Springs.

I have been on the public record saying it is really frustrating and disappointing to see the damage caused by people. Often it was children. I understand the rock throwing that broke windows was young children and to me that was children who were not supervised. We put in place schooling for the kids and by all accounts the kids who went to school did the right thing and were very well behaved, but there was a group of kids who were not doing the right thing after hours.

We had police there. During the times I went out there, I saw police. The police got to know the families and people out there. We also had security guards out there, so government did what was necessary.

As I said, this damage is unacceptable and is not something our government wanted at all.

Mr MALEY: I have a few questions from that. I cannot see a budget line for the \$288,000 for stage one repairs, so where did that come from?

Ms LAWLER: That was the financial year to end of 2023, so 30 June 2023. Those floods happened during February, March and April, so you will not see a budget line as it was in that financial year.

DIPL uses repairs and maintenance funding for that money. It has a budget for repairs and maintenance. This budget has additional money into repairs and maintenance, which I have talked about today. There is an additional \$30m for repairs and maintenance.

There is not a separate budget line for repairs and maintenance for Howard Springs. There is \$5m in the budget, as Howard Spring needs to always be maintained. In Budget 2022–23, there is \$5m for the maintenance, power and water, sewerage and employee expenses.

The expenditure to 31 March 2023 of that \$5m is \$3,918,000. There is \$152,000 in employee expenses. There is \$1.1m in repairs and maintenance, without including the damage that was caused by the evacuees. The power bill is \$508,000 and water and sewerage is \$1.4m. Security is always out there, which is \$637,000. There is always a \$5m cost to run Howard Springs, but the money I have talked about is on top of that. It is \$288,000.

Mr MALEY: Going back to that C&R assessment—you said that was \$27,000—was that a select tender or an open tender?

Ms LAWLER: It was an open tender.

Mr MALEY: Has that tender been varied at all?

Ms LAWLER: I apologise; C&R was a select tender.

Mr WALDING: It was a select tender under the emergency act to get them to do the assessments. I am not aware of it being varied, but I will have to take that on notice. I do not have that level of detail.

Mr MALEY: Has that assessment been undertaken yet?

Ms LAWLER: It is under way now.

Mr CHAIR: He said that he would take that on notice; do you want him to come back to you about the variation?

Mr MALEY: Yes.

Mr WALDING: Let me take two things if that is all right. I will take a variation, and I will make sure if it was single, select or open tender.

Mr MALEY: There will be two questions. Was the tender an open tender or a select tender? That is the first. Have there been any variations to that original tender, which is valued at \$27,000? That is the second.

Ms LAWLER: I have just checked with the chief executive, and it was a select tender. You can get a disaster exemption, so it was a select tender.

Question on Notice No 2.13

Mr CHAIR: Member for Nelson, please restate your question for the record.

Mr MALEY: Was there any variation to the tender?

Mr CHAIR: Minister, do you accept the question?

Ms LAWLER: Yes.

Mr CHAIR: The question asked by the Member for Nelson has been allocated the number 2.13.

Mr MALEY: In relation to that assessment, when will it be finished?

Ms LAWLER: When C&R Constructions finish it.

Mr WALDING: It will have to be finished in the next couple of weeks.

Mr MALEY: Have you got any draft reports from them in relation to that assessment?

Mr WALDING: No, I have not.

Mr MALEY: Has anyone, if you have not? Has anyone in the department or government received the draft report?

Mr WALDING: No, they will be doing the assessment, and we will get the first draft back once it is finished. There is no point getting half the rooms assessed, so we will get the draft report back and go from there.

Mr MALEY: In relation to the fire extinguishers, you were saying there is \$11,400. Have they all been replaced now?

Ms LAWLER: The figures I have at budget Estimates are until 31 March, but I am giving you figures until the 31 May, so for another two months. That was two weeks ago. I am trying to give you as up-to-date figures as I can.

As of 31 May, the spend on fire extinguishers was \$11,448.25. There could be more. We will see some of that work from C&R Constructions as well, I suggest. That is the figure I have for 31 May.

Mr MALEY: What amount of damage would constitute wear and tear?

Ms LAWLER: Some of the mattresses might have been wear and tear. I know you are referring to the Chief Minister's comments. The initial conversations and information we had were that there was some damage, but the damage was minimal.

Part of the issue was that kids were there for a long time. Kids get bored, unfortunately. Some of the adults' behaviour was unacceptable. We saw instances of domestic violence. Some of the behaviours we see in all of our community did not change just because they were evacuees at Howard Springs.

Things the government put in place included a drying-out section, because people were coming back drunk. It was not like COVID where they were isolated and not allowed out; people could come and go as they pleased. There were buses, and I saw minibuses going in and out. People were coming back inebriated, so an area was set up for them to dry out and sober up.

Some of the behaviours in regard to domestic violence were terrible. The length of time also meant the kids got bored and got up to some very poor behaviours.

Mr MALEY: When was the last time you toured the premises?

Ms LAWLER: I do not know the date. I think it was about a week before the last lot were sent home, which I think was early May. When I was there, there were only the Pigeon Hole people left, which was only about 100 people. Everybody else had gone.

Mr MALEY: How many times have you been there personally?

Ms LAWLER: Three times during this evacuation process.

Mr MALEY: Can you give me the dates of those three times?

Ms LAWLER: I cannot right now.

Mr MALEY: Can you take it on notice?

Ms LAWLER: I can. My chief of staff might be able to get it before the end of Estimates.

Question on Notice No 2.14

Mr CHAIR: Member for Nelson, please restate the question for the record.

Mr MALEY: Can you give us the dates of the three times you have visited the centre in relation to the evacuees?

Mr CHAIR: Minister, do you accept the question?

Ms LAWLER: Yes.

Mr CHAIR: The question asked by the Member for Nelson has been allocated the number 2.14.

Mr MALEY: The last time you went in May, who went with you?

Ms LAWLER: Louise McCormick, and the media were there.

Mr MALEY: Just the two government representatives and the media?

Ms LAWLER: I had an adviser with me.

Mr MALEY: How long did that tour take?

Ms LAWLER: Probably an hour.

Mr MALEY: Did you go through all parts of the centre when you were there?

Ms LAWLER: Let us clarify 'all parts of the centre'. The centre is 3,500 rooms; I did not go through every room in the facility. I walked through the central area where they were coordinating the response. I think that was the second time. The second time I went there, I had a solid look. The third time we were on a golf buggy, and we went from the pickup area around the pathways to a media area and looked at the demountables. On the second time I was there, I had a more substantial look, rather than the third time.

Mr MALEY: You mentioned earlier that there was just over \$79,000 for a building repairs labour tender. Is that a select tender or an open tender?

Ms LAWLER: I think that was various. Some of that work would have been done by the staff who work out there and panel contracts as well.

Mr MALEY: Can you expand on what that work was? You said ‘building repairs and labour’, so I am just asking about that. There is almost \$80,000 worth of building repairs. Can you expand on what they were?

Ms LAWLER: Yes, some of it was patching and painting, and doing the window boarding up, which would have been the guys on site doing some of that. Some of it was lock repairs and some fence panel replacements.

Mr MALEY: Fence panel replacements—that is a new one; I have not heard that before. Can you explain what that is?

Ms LAWLER: Have you heard lock repairs before? Have you heard patching and painting before?

Mr MALEY: No, I am going to ask for all three of them. That was just one you mentioned.

Ms LAWLER: I think the fence panels were from some of the external fencing, but I will pass to Adam Walding.

Mr WALDING: Fence panels would have been the internal fences within the facility—how it is segregated off. I do not know whether you have been out there and seen it. There were some internal fences that needed to be repaired. There were external fences that needed repair as well.

Mr MALEY: We have not had the C&R assessment yet, which is the \$27,000 tender. How did we get this tender for \$79,000? Who authorised that? How did that come about when there is no formal assessment done yet?

Ms LAWLER: Some of that money would have been the building repairs happening at the time—window boarding, repairing locks, fence panels. Some of that money would have been, thinking logically, the money spent at the time and they were active there.

Mr MALEY: Can I just go back to the \$80,000, and you mentioned locks and panels. Can you itemise those for me? Can you tell me how much was done on panels, how much on painting and how much on locks?

Ms LAWLER: No, I cannot. I do not have that in front of me. I have only building repairs, including patching and painting, window boarding, locks and repairs, fence panels.

Mr MALEY: You are saying that you do not have that information. You know this is a topical issue and you do not have that prepared yet.

Ms LAWLER: I have a brief in front of me that has that detail. Your question goes down to more than the detail that I have in front of me, which satisfies me that there was patching and painting done, window boarding up, lock repairs and fence panelling. That is enough information for me. As minister for Infrastructure, that is enough information for me to know that \$79,000 has been spent on building repairs and general labour. I do not need to go down to the layer of knowing how many nuts and bolts or whatever was there. I have that information there and that is sufficient.

Mr MALEY: You might not want to—I accept that—but Territorians do and we know that this is a topical issue. I am stunned and amazed that you do not have that information in front of you. Do you think that is acceptable?

Ms LAWLER: I think it is acceptable, and I am stunned and amazed that you think you also need to know those details.

Mr MALEY: Can you answer my question?

Ms LAWLER: I just did.

Mr MALEY: Do you think Territorians think that is acceptable?

Ms LAWLER: Of course they do because the average Territorian can understand that building repairs include patching and painting, window boarding and lock repairs. I do not think the average Territorian needs to know or is interested in knowing any more detail than ‘money was spent on patching and painting, window boarding, lock repairs and fence panels’. I have told you about fire extinguishers and mattresses. I think that is broad enough to know that there were issues and things that needed to be repaired. There are good people

in DIPL who are out there doing the work. C&R Constructions is doing the evaluation. That is how it works. As a minister that is the amount of information that I need to know around that.

Mr CHAIR: Member for Nelson, I am comfortable she has answered that question.

Mr MALEY: No, I am not. I want to rephrase that ...

Mr CHAIR: Member for Nelson, I said I am comfortable as the Chair that she has answered it. You can ask a different question, but if we are going down the same line of questioning around very specific line item detail, I do not want to have this discussion again.

Mrs LAMBLEY: The problem that you are faced with is the fact that the Chief Minister was not up-front about the extent of the damage to begin with. The questions the Member for Nelson are asking is because of that. There was a shroud of secrecy around it. Why was I refused a tour of the centre when it seems like everyone else has had a tour?

Mr MALEY: I will answer that question. I wrote in on 4 April for an inspection and I did not even get a response. I asked for a tour and no-one even replied to my correspondence.

Mrs LAMBLEY: Given the extent of the damage and the secrecy around it, it became a great focus of interest obviously. The media were taken around and you question who was given permission—not that is right, Adam just asked had you been there. Everyone wanted then to see what was happening. The fact that I was denied a tour made me very suspicious.

Ms LAWLER: It was not your portfolio. As the Member for Araluen ...

Mrs LAMBLEY: They are all my portfolio.

Ms LAWLER: ... that was probably more the issue. Obviously government understands the interest in it. Just to be clear, Member for Nelson, what would you have done differently? Would you have stopped those people from being evacuated to Howard Springs? Would you have made those people go to Foskey Pavilion and sleep on camp stretchers for six weeks? That is the point. From the government point of view ...

Mr MALEY: No it is not. The point is the waste of taxpayers' money. It was a waste under your watch.

Ms LAWLER: ... it was what had to be done. Government does not want to see damage. A good day is when everybody in the Northern Territory is behaving themselves. You seem to have this view that we want ...

Mr MALEY: You do not have many good days then, do you?

Ms LAWLER: ... crime and we ignore crime. Absolutely not! I was abhorred and shocked as much as anybody when I saw the damage there ...

Mr MALEY: We are running out of time and this rant is just a rant. Can we get back to the questions, please?

Ms LAWLER: You just ...

Mr MALEY: It is just a rant. You are not here to rant; you are here to answer questions. I am here to ask questions.

Ms LAWLER: It is not a rant. It is my opportunity to get on the public record because you are making ...

Mr MALEY: The Chair is here to take responsibility. You have all day to do that. We have until five o'clock. Mr Chair, can we please get on with the questions?

Ms LAWLER: That is not my problem; it is your problem because you have not looked at the timing of this whole Estimates.

Mr CHAIR: Member for Nelson! Minister! As the Chair I am asking you both to cease interjecting while I am talking. We have to have some level of decorum in the committee.

I am comfortable that the minister has answered the question and put it on the record clearly where we sit on this issue.

Member for Nelson, I understand this is a topical issue for you as the local member, and you would like to continue that line of questioning. I am happy to continue doing that, but there will be a level of decorum or members will be ejected for disorderly conduct. It is as simple as that.

Member for Nelson, reframe the question.

Mr MALEY: Going back to that, I will read from your document you tabled in 2016, Restoring Integrity to Government:

Open, transparent and accountable government is also the best way to maximise the health and prosperity of the whole community.

Not only is it the right thing to do, it is the smart thing to do.

They are your Labor government's words, yet you do not have answers to an \$80,000 tender when you know it is topical. Why do you not have that detail?

Mr CHAIR: The minister has answered that and given you an explanation as to why. You will differ on how much detail needs to be provided.

Mr MALEY: Can we take that on notice?

Mr CHAIR: You can put it to the minister and see whether she will take the question.

Mr MALEY: I am after the line items for the \$80,000 tender, one by one.

Question on Notice No 2.15

Mr CHAIR: Member for Nelson, please restate the question for the record.

Mr MALEY: Can you please give us a line-by-line itemised account of the \$79,000 tender that was for building, repairs and labour?

Mr CHAIR: Minister, do you accept the question?

Ms LAWLER: Yes.

Mr CHAIR: The question asked by the Member for Nelson has been allocated the number 2.15.

Mr CHAIR: Member for Nelson, I am looking to you that we can move on from that specific line item discussion now she has taken it on notice.

Mr MALEY: The next question is about the blocked sewerage. You said it was \$35,000. Was that an open tender or a select tender?

Ms LAWLER: My understanding is that would have been a select tender as well.

Mr MALEY: Why are these select tenders and not going out to the open public, which may give the best opportunity for taxpayers' money to be spent wisely?

Ms LAWLER: It can be done quickly.

Mr MALEY: You are saying an open tender cannot be done quickly?

Ms LAWLER: No, an open tender cannot be done as quickly as a select tender. With a select tender you can get things happening immediately. You can go to your panel contractors or you can do it next day literally when you go to a select tender, whereas with a tender you would have to advertise for a couple of weeks, then have to have the panel sit, and things blow out.

We want to have that facility back up and running as soon as possible.

Mr MALEY: In relation to the blocked sewerage, can you please expand on what the tender was, who got it and what the damage was?

Ms LAWLER: Yes. The damage was \$35,159.26. I will pass to Adam Walding who can provide more information on that. I am not sure what else he can add to that, but the sewerage was blocked and they had to bring plumbers in. We used panel contractors, so they would have had to bring a panel contractor in to fix the blocked sewerage. Is there any other information you have?

Mr WALDING: There were different blocked sewers over the period. One was about three metres down. Where the pipe was, you had to baffle it and push it down, which explains some of the costs. We used our panel contractors for the works. They were blocked with anything from nappies to rocks, which is normally fine in sewer systems, although not always. Sometimes they come through. Power and Water will find them in a normal domestic network.

Mr MALEY: Was it a number of blockages, not one blockage?

Mr WALDING: That is my understanding, yes.

Mr MALEY: Were they all found within a certain time frame or over a number of weeks, months or days?

Mr WALDING: The values that the minister provided you are through that period of the relocation of members from the community.

Mr MALEY: What conversations did you have with the Chief Minister about the repairs as you knew about it? How often did you have those conversations?

Answer to Question on Notice No 2.14

Ms LAWLER: First of all, I can actually answer the questions that were taken on notice about the dates that I was out there. On 3 March [Editor note: on 16 June 2023 Minister Lawler requested this be changed to 4 March] I went out there with the Chief Minister and that was very early on when the evacuees were there. On 21 April I went out there to thank the DIPL staff for their work and I had a tour. On 5 May I was out there with Louise McCormick, my adviser and Channel Nine media.

Ms LAWLER: The conversations with the Chief Minister earlier on were not to do with the repairs or any of the maintenance; our focus was on getting kids to school. That was the major focus. It was also on the damage in the community. As DIPL minister, I was highly concerned about the level of flooding and the photos I had seen.

Most of that time the conversations with the Chief Minister were about getting kids to school, having the kids' school settled, but also the damage at the community and how quickly we could have people returned. There were also conversations about the people who were there and they were quite unsettled. They were concerned about their homes and that their houses would not be rebuilt, so there were conversations along that line.

It probably really was not until late April or May that the damage information came through. Previously the conversations had been around wear and tear. It was about small amounts of damage. Things were happening because you had a lot of people in one place, like nappies being shoved into a toilet. It was only later, probably late April or early May, when we started to hear more about the damage. At that time I did not necessarily have a conversation with the Chief Minister about the damage.

It was mid-May when I went out there with the media that I had the opportunity to see just how many windows were broken.

Mr MALEY: You just answered a lot of questions. On 3 March you went down with the Chief Minister. Did you see any damage then?

Ms LAWLER: No, I think it was the first weekend—it might have even been a Saturday morning that I went there—when evacuees were there. At that stage, people were in shock. I spoke to a range of people as we

walked in along where the buses pull up. There is a large gym area, a large basketball court area, and people were sitting there. I had a range of conversations, along with the Chief Minister, with elders from those communities to hear what had happened in their own community and the concerns they had. That visit with the Chief Minister was very much focused on the evacuees, how they had left their dogs behind, who was feeding their dogs and a whole heap of things like that.

Mr MALEY: On 21 April when you went there, was there any damage then?

Ms LAWLER: On 21 April when I went there, yes, I saw damage. I saw boarded-up windows.

Mr MALEY: When did you first become aware that there was damage at the facility?

Ms LAWLER: Earlier on, probably around 21 April, was when I was aware that there was some sort of damage. I cannot remember in detail, but it would have been around that visit. I went out there to thank the staff. It was coming to the end, when the evacuees were about to leave. One of the staff took me around the site in a golf buggy. I could see the boarded-up windows and things then.

Mr MALEY: That was on about 21 April?

Ms LAWLER: Yes.

Mr MALEY: On 5 April, which is the first week in April—basically 20 days before then—is when the tender for the 265 mattresses was awarded. Did you not have any idea that there was damage being done, knowing on 5 April there was a tender for the mattresses?

Ms LAWLER: I was not aware of those mattress ones until I was advised later, but some of those mattresses ...

Mr MALEY: I am not talking about the damage. I am asking about the time line.

Ms LAWLER: ... were just replacements.

Mr MALEY: On 5 April was when that tender was released. You just told us that you did not know about it until 20 April, so what happened between 5 April and 20 April? You do not know anything about that, is that what you are saying?

Ms LAWLER: No, I do not.

Mr MALEY: So what are you saying?

Mr CHAIR: Let the minister finish, Member for Nelson.

Ms LAWLER: Just stop and let me talk, for goodness sake!

Mr MALEY: Why do you not stop confusing Territorians and be honest?

Ms LAWLER: I am not. Just stop and listen to me.

Mr MALEY: Be open and transparent. Why do you not do that?

Ms LAWLER: Why do you not just stop and listen?

Mr CHAIR: How about we all just stop for a second, members.

Member for Nelson, you need to stop and let the minister answer. You may not like the answer the minister gives, but then you get to ask a supplementary follow-on question. I would hate in the last hour and 20 minutes to get someone for disorderly conduct. I have already given the Leader of the Opposition one.

When she talks, you listen. When you are talking, she will listen.

Ms LAWLER: The replacement of mattresses was also replacing mattresses that they had in storage. They replace mattresses and there were mattresses that were coming to their end of life. It was a contract that went out to replace mattresses. I was not advised that they were replacing mattresses at that time. Yes, they

would have needed to replace mattresses and some of that would have been work that needed to happen anyway. I cannot remember the exact date I was advised that mattresses needed to be replaced.

I do not know why you are so hung up on that. If you want to have a facility where a number of people are moving in, you want to have clean mattresses. Young children were there, so you can imagine that some of those mattresses were damaged and stained. That is the reality. If you think back to when you had young children sleeping on mattresses, there would have been wear and tear. When you have little children or elderly people, you see damaged mattresses. I have had a lot to do with nursing homes and understand that there is going to be damage to mattresses.

Answer to Question on Notice No 2.13

Ms LAWLER: There are no variations to the C&R Constructions condition assessment tender; it is \$27,687.27.

Mr CHAIR: While there is a lull, I will reiterate to the Estimates Committee that it is disorderly to insinuate that someone is lying or to call someone a liar. I remind everyone that words of ‘untruthful’ and the like will not fly from hereon in.

Mr MALEY: I am confused about the time line. You and the Chief Minister went there on 3 March. There was not any damage. You just mentioned that these mattresses were replaced for the people who were coming to stay there. They must have been there on 3 March because that is why you went there, a whole month before the tender was issued for the mattresses. Why is that time line a month out? You just gave an explanation that the mattresses were there for new people coming in, so kids would not sleep on old mattresses. They must have been there on 3 March when you went there.

Ms LAWLER: You did not listen to me. I did not say that. I said that the tender went out for the mattresses and was awarded on 18 April. I was saying that when I found about it, I just presumed—I may have had a conversation with someone—that those mattresses were replacing some of the mattresses that went into storage. If you go out to the Centre for National Resilience, the Howard Springs accommodation facility, they have a storage area. My understanding was that some of those mattresses were going into storage and they were just building up their supplies. They have extra mattresses and extra lots of things there. That was my view at that time. It was not that they were replacing mattresses that were there; it was replacing mattresses that might have needed to be stored or used in the future.

Mr MALEY: Have any steps been taken to recoup the losses or damages from the people who caused this damage?

Ms LAWLER: Yes, I have asked the department to follow up if they have evidence of anybody causing that damage. I will pass to Louise McCormick, the acting chief executive.

Ms McCORMICK: There were a number of incidents there with police, as the minister mentioned. To put forward a formal complaint to police, we have to provide them an evidence base. We are currently gathering that information now. There were some that were pretty obvious and we have already reported, but there were a number of incidents that we are putting together for police to investigate further.

Mr MALEY: In relation to some of those line items, you mentioned there was a sobering-up shelter, that the police were there, furniture was replaced, there was general maintenance and there was servicing. Can you give me how much was spent on each one of those line items at the time the evacuees were there?

Ms LAWLER: I would have to take that on notice. Some of those are not DIPL’s responsibility, just to be clear. Some of the whole running of the Howard Springs accommodation facility is the work of Territory Families, so you would probably need to ask Minister Worden about that. The bits I can follow up for you will be on infrastructure repairs.

Question on Notice No 2.16

Mr CHAIR: Member for Nelson, please restate the question for the record.

Mr NELSON: Can you please provide us a line-by-line itemised account on the cost of the windows; the maintenance; all the servicing whilst the evacuees were there—the general lights and locks, whatever you

were talking about—the mattresses; any broken furniture, including TVs, tables and chairs; the setting up of the sobering-up shelter; the police moving there; the windows getting boarded up; any panel damage to the fence panels, internal and external; any damage to the pool; and any damage to the gym?

Mr CHAIR: Minister, do you accept the question?

Ms LAWLER: Yes.

Mr CHAIR: The question asked by the Member for Nelson has been allocated the number 2.16.

Mr CHAIR: Just to clarify, if those line items do not reside with DIPL or the relevant minister, are you happy to re-ask them on record for the Minister for Territory Families?

Mr MALEY: We will ask the same questions, yes.

When do you expect the tender for the 573 windows to be fulfilled?

Ms LAWLER: I will pass to Adam Walding. As the minister I do not have anything to do with tenders or procurement.

Mr WALDING: We are anticipating that to be awarded late June—later this month.

Mr MALEY: Do you have an estimated cost?

Mr WALDING: Yes, we will. There are another 500 windows to go roughly. I cannot really talk about pricing before someone has to win it. We cannot talk about pricing before we go to tender; it would be inappropriate.

Mr CHAIR: Maybe you could put the question on notice if you would like to. There is a time period that will overlap that.

Question on Notice No 2.17

Mr CHAIR: Member for Nelson, please restate the question for the record.

Mr NELSON: Can you please give us an estimate of cost for the windows that will be replaced once the tender is awarded?

Mr CHAIR: Minister, do you accept the question?

MS LAWLER: Yes.

Mr CHAIR: The question asked by the Member for Nelson has been allocated the number 2.17.

Mr CHAIR: Knowing you said you had one more question, can we close out the whole-of-government questions?

Mrs LAMBLEY: I have one question.

Mr MALEY: I have more questions in relation to the full-time employee you have employed. What is that person's role and has that person commenced?

Ms LAWLER: There are four employees out there. The job that was advertised was just filling in a role that was already there. There is a \$5m budget for the Centre for National Resilience. The expenditure to 31 March is \$3.9m. That was an employee ...

Mr MALEY: To clarify, is the position advertised recently to oversee the repairs and maintenance not a new position?

Mr WALDING: No, it is not a new position. We have had someone there to look after the facility for a long time. Since we have had the facility, we have had to have a caretaker. The position with the future potential use, which the minister—the position is long term to look after the facility.

Mr MALEY: What was the title of the position recently advertised?

Mr WALDING: I do not have the title. I should know, but I do not.

Mr MALEY: Does anyone else know?

Mr CHAIR: Do you have the title, Member for Nelson? Is that what you are asking?

Mr MALEY: I have a fair idea. I am just asking whether anyone there has it before I say what I think it is.

Ms LAWLER: No, I do not have that, but that is not the role of the minister to know an individual position in an agency.

Mr MALEY: Do any of your support staff there to help you?

Ms LAWLER: They are not my support staff; they are high-level executives.

Mr MALEY: Can any of the department heads; sorry?

Ms LAWLER: No, they do not.

Mrs LAMBLEY: You asked the Member for Nelson what he would have done differently. Can I ask you the same question, given the fiasco that unfolded with all the damage? How would you have managed the evacuees going to Howard Springs differently?

Ms LAWLER: Not differently. It was not a fiasco. During an emergency people need to be housed. That is a human right. Those people were housed there. Was that centre ideal for that? Possibly not. It was the right decision at the time. It was vacant and had all the facilities. It had bedroom spaces where people from various communities would be able to be separated; it was large enough for that.

Government was not to know that some of the people who went there would damage the facility. The expectation is that people would look after that facility.

Member for Araluen, it would be nice if you listen to the answer I give you, rather than texting ...

Mrs LAMBLEY: I am totally listening to you.

Ms LAWLER: You are not. You are just Facebooking it—I know. It would be nice to be polite enough to at least listen. You have the opportunity ...

Mrs LAMBLEY: Mr Chair, that is out of order.

Ms LAWLER: It is not. You are not even ...

Mrs LAMBLEY: I can do what I want with my hands and eyes. You cannot tell me how to behave.

Ms LAWLER: It would be nice if you listened to an answer.

Mr CHAIR: Members!

Mrs LAMBLEY: That is out of order.

Ms LAWLER: Listen to an answer!

Mr CHAIR: Minister and members of the committee, we are well and truly digressing from answering and asking the questions that are pertinent to Budget 2023–24 and the operational outcome of the department.

Minister, I remind you that you are to answer the questions and steer to those questions. What the members are doing here ...

Mrs LAMBLEY: I can sit here and pick my nose if I want to, minister.

Mr CHAIR: Member for Araluen, I was literally going through ...

Ms LAWLER: I am used to people being a little more polite. When they ask a question, they listen and look at you and all the rest.

Mrs LAMBLEY: Just answer the question, please.

Ms LAWLER: Why bother? You are not even listening.

Members interjecting.

Mr CHAIR: Member for Nelson, cease the interjections, thank you very much.

Member for Araluen, I was doing exactly as I thought was appropriate—making a point of order on that comment—and you had to interject.

Mrs LAMBLEY: You only warn the non-government members and put us all on notice. You never put the minister on notice. How she just behaved was out of order.

Mr CHAIR: Had I finished?

Ms LAWLER: No, it was not; it was just telling you that you are being rude.

Mr CHAIR: Minister!

Mrs LAMBLEY: You were telling me not to do what I want to do, which is sitting in my chair.

Mr CHAIR: Minister, cease interjecting. Let me answer this and resolve it.

We are getting close to five o'clock, and I am sure there are many other questions that the committee would like to ask about infrastructure. Can we progress for the final hour and show some decorum? I would hate to remove both the minister and members of the committee ...

Ms LAWLER: Ask your questions.

Mr CHAIR: Cease interjections while I am talking. We still have the same standing orders inside this place as we do in the House. Do you understand?

Mr MALEY: Yes.

Mr CHAIR: Do not finger point; it is childish, Member for Araluen.

Mrs LAMBLEY: You just finger pointed to me.

Mr CHAIR: That is not a finger; it is a palm.

Mrs LAMBLEY: Exactly—same thing.

Mr CHAIR: I am talking, and I am the Chair. We are going around in circles. Member for Nelson, do you have anything else ...

Mr MALEY: Who paid for the bus service that ferried the evacuees into Palmerston and Casuarina from Howard Springs?

Ms LAWLER: I need to take that question on notice. I am not sure whether it was DIPL or the Department of the Chief Minister and Cabinet.

Mr CHAIR: Member for Nelson, please restate the question for the record.

Ms LAWLER: No, no. I have the answer from the back rows. It was funded by DIPL.

Mr MALEY: How much did it cost?

Ms LAWLER: I will take that question on notice.

Question on Notice No. 2.18

Mr CHAIR: Member for Nelson, please restate the question for the record.

Mr MALEY: How much was the total funding for that bus service at the Howard Springs centre for the evacuees?

Ms LAWLER: There was also a bus that took kids to school. Are you asking about that as well?

Ms LAWLER: There is two parts. I want the bus that was the ferry service that took people into Palmerston and Casuarina and I think Darwin city as well. If there was a school bus, that as well.

Mr CHAIR: Minister, do you accept the question?

Ms LAWLER: Yes.

Mr CHAIR: The question asked by the Member for Nelson has been allocated the number 2.18.

Mrs HERSEY: How many of the tenders have been filled? How many are in the pipeline for Howard Springs?

Ms LAWLER: I think we have gone over those figures already. The only one that is out to tender is the window replacement stage two. All the others have been sorted.

Mrs HERSEY: How many tenders are there all together?

Ms LAWLER: I have been through this. Blocked sewerage and plumbing that was a select tender. The fire extinguishers, the building repairs and general labour, the mattresses, the condition assessment and the window replacement stage one. There have been six.

The building repairs and general were panel contracts and some of the building repair work would have been carried out by the staff in Howard Springs. The only one that is outstanding is the window replacement.

Mrs HERSEY: Are there six tenders and one outstanding?

Ms LAWLER: Yes, but as we said, they were panel contracts, so there were already tenders that had been given to government in the last year or two. The building repairs and general labour would have been panel contractors.

Mrs HERSEY: How much of the DIPL budget has been spent on Howard Springs?

Ms LAWLER: In relation to what?

Mrs HERSEY: The flooding evacuees there.

Ms LAWLER: I am not sure; your question is rather broad.

Mrs HERSEY: How much has been spent?

Ms LAWLER: There was \$288,164.55 spent on the repairs. To 31 March \$3.9m has been spent on Howard Springs. That includes \$1.4m for water and sewerage; \$508,000 for power; and security is \$637,000.

There is generally a spend of \$1.17m maintaining that site. This includes lawn mowing, cleaning up, spraying weeds and replacing anything that is broken out there, so \$3.9m plus the \$288,000.

Mr MALEY: Have you spoken to any of your ministerial colleagues about the damage at Howard Springs; and, if so, when did you do that?

Ms LAWLER: Yes, I have. It was probably around 5 May when I did media. I would have had conversations with Kate Worden because she was the minister responsible for Territory Families.

Mr MALEY: What about when you first found out about the damage? It was on 20 May, I think. Is that correct because that was when you first out? After you found out, who did you speak to?

Ms LAWLER: Yes, around 20 May. I do not even remember who I spoke to. I may not even have spoken to any of my colleagues. It is more likely that I spoke to Louise McCormick, the acting chief executive, about that. I would have spoken to my staff as well.

Mr MALEY: When did you speak to the acting chief executive?

Ms LAWLER: We speak probably every single day by phone. We speak most days.

Mr MALEY: I am just asking about the damage to Howard Springs.

Ms LAWLER: I never keep notes about those sorts of things and I could not tell you. I have lots of busy portfolios and could not tell you. I had those dates messaged down to me from my chief of staff. If they did not have those dates, I would not be able to remember them.

Mr MALEY: Just to confirm, you found out about the damage at Howard Springs on about 20 May?

Ms LAWLER: I went out there on 21 April and I vaguely remember that it was a Friday. I think I would have had a discussion with either the chief of staff or my adviser that I was going out there and they might have told me.

Mr MALEY: I do not want you to think about it. If you do not know, just say you do not know. If you do not know, you do not know.

Ms LAWLER: Gerard the lawyer, I am not in a court here. We are having a conversation—it is Estimates—about that.

Mr MALEY: 'May have' is not good enough. You either did or you did not.

Mr CHAIR: I would hate to force a break for everyone to calm down. We have about 50 minutes left. I know you are conscious of the time, Member for Nelson, but if we all keep going down this path, we will take a break until everyone calms down.

Ms LAWLER: It would be nice to answer some other questions about the fantastic infrastructure program we have in the Northern Territory.

Mr CHAIR: Minister, I am about to get to the point where I will say to them we will move on to the outputs.

Mrs LAMBLEY: I do not get to choose.

Mr CHAIR: Member for Araluen, I am getting to the point to move them on and answer the question. I do not need the internal commentary from anyone on the committee when I am talking.

Mr MALEY: Those are my questions in relation to Howard Springs.

I want to switch to the Alice Springs Youth Detention Centre now. Can you give me an update on the Alice Springs Youth Detention Centre and where it is at in relation to its budget, what the original one was and what it is now?

Ms LAWLER: The Alice Springs facility contract was awarded to Asbuild NT, an Alice Springs company, on 14 July 2020 for stage one works of \$11.9m. This was followed on 27 January 2021 by a variation for stage two works of \$8.3m. There was stage one followed by stage two. There was a number of variations. The total cost for stage one was \$26.53m and for stage two it was \$2.8m. I am not sure of those figures, so I will pass to Adam Walding.

Mr WALDING: It is the same deal with this contract. It is a live contract and is under negotiation with some of the components. When it is completed, we will be happy to share the figures. We are negotiating variations and fees.

The works down there is now a two-stage handover process. I think it has been discussed previously. The administration block and some accommodation cells will be handed over in July/August. Then we will start stage two at the back of the facility, which are the existing blocks to finish off the work. It is intended towards the end of this year that will be completed and the facility will be finished.

Mr MALEY: What was the original budget for that facility?

Ms LAWLER: It was always a two-stage process. Stage one, which is the reception building, four-bedroom accommodation building, car parking, secure fencing and the grass football oval, was \$11.9m. Stage two is refurbishments of and new security arrangements, refitting of bedrooms, removal of existing transportable classrooms, removal of existing security fences that will be made redundant once the new facilities are complete, extensive landscaping and shade structures.

Stage one originally was \$11.9m.

Mr MALEY: What was stage two?

Ms LAWLER: Stage two was \$8.3m.

Mrs LAMBLEY: Where does the \$26.53m come into it?

Ms LAWLER: I think stage one and stage two, if you add them up, is getting close to what the figure is for the completion of those works. Adam said that they are still negotiating some of that because it is not completed. Both stages will be completed by October. It will have the capacity to accommodate 18 youths with up to 24 beds.

Mr MALEY: What was the original number of beds? You said 18 youths. My understanding from the written questions is that there would be 22 beds. I am confused.

Ms LAWLER: The notes I have state that the completed facility will have the capacity to accommodate 18 youths with up to 24 beds, so it is between 18 and 24 beds.

Some of these questions around the nitty-gritty of beds and usage are things for Territory Families.

Mr MALEY: It is the nitty-gritty of taxpayers' money.

Ms LAWLER: These are issues for Territory Families.

Mr WALDING: Some other components that will go under that contract are the FF&E—the fit-out of beds, chairs and that type of item. As for the beds, under the fire engineering reports it is about how we can maximise space. If we have to put extra kids in a cell, how does that work. It gives us the capacity to up and down; however, Territory Families will be able to talk through that further.

Mr MALEY: How much money has been spent on that facility to date?

Ms LAWLER: We do not have that figure because we have both youth justice centres on it.

Mrs LAMBLEY: If stage two has not commenced yet, how can it be concluded by October?

Mr WALDING: It will be later in the year; the intent is October. However, I suppose over the last few weeks we have had some more changes in the time frames. July will be the changeover of the kids so that has been pushed back a bit with some circumstances. That will push that time out. It will be towards the end of the year. At stage two they have to gut internally, put in some new fire walls and all sorts of stuff.

Mrs LAMBLEY: Are you saying that will be completed by October?

Mr WALDING: I am saying it will be done by the end of this year, yes.

Mrs LAMBLEY: It does not seem like a big time frame.

Mr WALDING: No, I suppose it is more refurbishment work in that space and the oval will be at the side. Hopefully the oval will be done in between as well.

Ms LAWLER: Mr Chair, I have some information around the job title at Howard Springs accommodation facility. It is Director Infrastructure, it is a SAO2 and the job ad is out at the moment.

Mr MALEY: Taking on notice the question about how much money is being spent on the Alice Springs Youth Detention Centre as of date, you will take that on notice. Is that where we are at?

Ms LAWLER: No, we can take that on notice.

Question on Notice No 2.19

Mr CHAIR: Member for Nelson, please restate the question for the record.

Mr MALEY: How much money has been spent on the Alice Springs Youth Detention Centre as of 31 March?

Mr CHAIR: Minister, do you accept the question?

Ms LAWLER: Yes.

Mr CHAIR: The question asked by the Member for Nelson has been allocated the number 2.19.

Mr MALEY: How many variations have been approved to date?

Ms LAWLER: As we have previously said to you—I do not know whether you understand variations—the variations in many of these buildings and the work can be multiple. There can be lots of them. Sometimes ...

Mr MALEY: I am asking how many to date.

Ms LAWLER: We do not have the information at hand.

Mr MALEY: Can I have that as a question on notice?

Ms LAWLER: Yes, I can. I do not know why you want to know those variations because it gets down to some of those nitty-gritty things that are really discussions. We will see what can be made public through Asbuild.

Mr CHAIR: We understand what is confidential, but it is a valid question.

Question on Notice No 2.20

Mr CHAIR: Member for Nelson, please restate the question for the record.

Mr MALEY: How many variations in that project have there been to date?

Mr CHAIR: Minister, do you accept the question?

Ms LAWLER: Yes. We will talk to Asbuild about that.

Mr CHAIR: Understood. The question asked by the Member for Nelson has been allocated the number 2.20.

Mr MALEY: Are you saying that there will be between 18 and 24 beds?

Ms LAWLER: Yes, but leave all the details to the Minister for Territory Families.

Mr MALEY: Will that be handed over by the end of October?

Ms LAWLER: We are saying between October and December.

Mr MALEY: The next round of questions is about the variable message signs. How many of the 30 signs have been erected so far? We are on all-of-agency questions.

Mr CHAIR: Unless that question falls inside an output, when the minister is well entitled to push it to there.

Ms LAWLER: The visual message signs are being installed across the NT to provide timely and accurately information to travellers. The intelligent technology system-based VMS project is being delivered as part of the NT road safety program and is aligned with the Australian Government Office of Road Safety initiatives to improve road safety on Australian roads. It was a strong push by the federal government and the previous federal government, too.

VMSs are increasingly being used by state road authorities to manage their road networks by introducing this smart technology to display real-time prudent traffic and road incident information to road users to help mitigate risk and improve road safety.

Twelve signs have already been installed in the greater Darwin area and these have been operating since December 2022. These large signs are size C. There will be two signs rolled out in the Katherine region, four in the Tennant Creek region and five in the Alice Springs region.

Mr MALEY: Is there a delay in rolling them out, or are they running on schedule?

Ms LAWLER: The Darwin signs were done first. We will continue to roll those out.

I can pass to Claire Brown to update us on those.

Ms BROWN: There are 12 fully installed to date. A number are in progress at the moment in Alice Springs. The footings have been done and my understanding is they are close to being finished if they have not been already. There is a number in other regional areas that will be continue to be rolled out by the contractor.

Mr MALEY: Has there been a delay in rolling them out?

Ms BROWN: Not to my understanding. That work has been ongoing since the commencement of the project.

Mr MALEY: Those signs were estimated at about \$400,000-and-something each in 2020 when they were first mentioned. Was it 2020 or 2021? When was the first one installed?

Ms LAWLER: They have been operational since December 2022. It was 2022, just last year.

Mr MALEY: If these signs are a year delayed, will that make a difference to the projected costs?

Ms LAWLER: No, the expenditure to 31 March—if that is what you are after because this is Estimates—is \$6.9m; \$5.3m of that is from the federal government and \$1.6m from the Northern Territory Government.

The Aertex Group was awarded the contract to supply and install the visual message boards throughout the Territory. It has a nominated subcontractor, J1-LED Intelligent Transport Systems Pty Ltd, to design and manufacture the VMS units, including the LED display, solar PV power—which is a great thing—control systems and support structure steelworks.

Mr MALEY: Have there been any variations to those contracts to date?

Ms LAWLER: We will have to take that on notice.

Question on Notice No 2.21

Mr CHAIR: Member for Nelson, please restate the question for the record.

Mr MALEY: Has there been any variation to the contract to install the variable message signs to date?

Mr CHAIR: Minister, do you accept the question?

Ms LAWLER: Yes.

Mr CHAIR: The question asked by the Member for Nelson has been allocated the number 2.21.

Mr MALEY: What is the maintenance cost for the 12 signs that were installed in the last year?

Ms LAWLER: I will take that on notice, but I think it is minimal as they run by solar.

Question on Notice No 2.22

Mr CHAIR: Member for Nelson, please restate the question for the record.

Mr MALEY: What is the maintenance cost on the 12 signs that have been installed to date?

Mr CHAIR: Minister, do you accept the question?

Mr MALEY: Yes.

Mr CHAIR: The question asked by the Member for Nelson has been allocated the number 2.22.

Mr MALEY: In relation to changing the message on these signs, there have been a number of accidents where the signs did not give anyone a warning of those accidents. Why is that the case? That is what they are designed for, and we have spent \$6.9m on them. I know of two accidents during which they have not worked.

Ms LAWLER: I think they work, but I will pass to Claire Brown to talk about the process.

Ms BROWN: The signs rely on personnel logging in to the system to update the messages. When accidents happen outside of normal business hours and we are not made aware of it immediately, the messages are not put up in real time.

Some of the signs [Editor note: on 16 June 2023 Minister Lawler requested that 'and signalised intersections' be added here] have cameras that the police can access to monitor accidents. In those instances, we may also see them ourselves and update messages based on that. Sometimes it is reliant on police notifying us.

Mr MALEY: Are you saying that if there is an accident outside of work hours, it is difficult to update those signs?

Ms BROWN: If we are not made immediately aware of the accident, yes.

Mrs HERSEY: How is the public meant to make DIPL aware if it is outside business hours?

Ms LAWLER: It is not up to the public to make DIPL aware. There are connections with police where they will notify outside of hours if there is an accident, for example, on Tiger Brennan Drive. Police, through their processes, organise traffic management at every accident and will notify DIPL staff who will then update the signs.

Mr MALEY: Are you saying that there is no need for these signs because police do their own traffic management?

Ms LAWLER: No. Police do not do their own traffic management. Police have a panel contract to have traffic management. I will refer to the accident on Tiger Brennan where a pedestrian was killed recently. Traffic management was in place with the cones up stopping the traffic going from Amy Johnson, so you could not go on to Tiger Brennan from Amy Johnson. When you got to Amy Johnson, you could not go any further.

The police have a traffic management company. It has been an issue in the past where people are looking at an accident and cause another accident, so a traffic management company is employed to put substantial traffic management in place to keep the accident scene safe but also to keep safe the police officers who are taking photographs and doing the investigation. That is sometimes kilometres away from the accident scene. The police are the ones instigating traffic management. That is the process.

Mr MALEY: Can you explain the process to update the signs? How does it work?

Ms BROWN: There is an internal policy we adhere to in regard to the nature of messages. Obviously emergency messaging takes priority, but we also put up various road safety messages as required. There is an internal department policy for that process.

Mr MALEY: I should have rephrased that. If there is an accident, what is the process? Let us say there is an accident at 10 o'clock at night. What is the process to update the sign so that people know the road is closed because there is a traffic accident? Tiger Brennan was at four in the morning. If there is an accident at 4.30 am and the police have shut down the road inbound for the peak hour, how does it get updated? Obviously it did not that day because it did not work. What would be the process? Do we have to wait until 8.21 am? How does it work?

Ms BROWN: We have an on-call road ops team and it would be up to the police or others to notify us of that incident, then logging onto the system and responding and updating the variable message boards in that sense. The road ops team also typically respond. They work 24 hours on call and respond to these events and assist police in setting up traffic management and managing the traffic at those locations.

Mr MALEY: If there is a major accident, is it up to the police to call somebody in your department?

Ms BROWN: Yes, and any other defects or incidents on the road can also be reported to the road reporting website.

Mr MALEY: Is that the police?

Ms BROWN: No, that comes to our department as well. If there are any incidents, there is a road reporting email that can be updated.

Mr MALEY: That is the general public. I will go back to the actual traffic accident on Tiger Brennan. It was from 6 am to 7.30 am when the signs were not working. There was an accident and the police were dealing with a fatality, which is pretty serious, yet they have to ring someone at road ops, and then road ops have to go into their office to log on.

Ms BROWN: No, the team can also remotely access the system to update the message signs.

Mr MALEY: If they cannot get hold of that road ops person, do they have to wait until they get hold of them?

Ms BROWN: Yes, that is the system at this point in time. It is managed by DIPL.

Mr MALEY: In relation to the signs, 24 hours a day is when they can do it. How many hours have they actually been on? Let us pick the one in Palmerston near Bunnings. How many hours a day is that on?

Ms BROWN: I could not answer that off the record. I would have to go back through the system.

Ms LAWLER: You ask obscure questions. Some of them we put road safety signs on. On a long weekend they were going 24/7 reminding people. During Road Safety Week we had a big push around mobile phones. You obviously did not read the sign, Member for Nelson—do not use your mobile phone. The signs are on 24/7 at times. Those times will vary.

Question on Notice No 2.23

Mr CHAIR: Member for Nelson, please restate the question for the record.

Mr MALEY: For the last six months, how many hours a day has the sign on the Stuart Highway opposite Bunnings been on?

Mr CHAIR: Would you like that as an average over the six months—maybe help them out a little—or is it per day, every day?

Mr MALEY: Not really. If they have the information, it is just a matter of downloading it.

Mr CHAIR: Minister, do you accept the question?

Ms LAWLER: Yes.

Mr CHAIR: The question asked by the Member for Nelson has been allocated the number 2.23.

Mr CHAIR: Before I hand to the Member for Araluen, for the final question in relation to whole of government, I will make a ruling on how we will use whole-of-government agency questions going forward. It is not a means to ask any question you like when the minister does not make an opening statement. Going forward, it will be related to the agency part of a wider government budget strategy as the whole of government. If it crosses multiple agencies and they are part of that policy and strategy in the context of the budget, you can ask the question. Going forward, it will not be used to target individual items when the minister does not make an opening statement or does not use the opening statement to answer an area you are after.

Mrs LAMBLEY: We have only 30 minutes left, so this will be my only question to you.

In 2017 you will remember that the Public Accounts Committee delivered a report on the taxi industry. At that time the government said it would implement all the recommendations of that report, including recommendation 1, which involved the deregulation of the taxi industry and the lifting of the cap. I am wondering where the government is at with that particular recommendation, which at the time was seen as the most critical and important.

Ms LAWLER: Like you, Member for Araluen, we get a lot of questions from the taxi industry. This was important work.

I will ask Cindy McDonald to speak about that because she is the expert and would be the best person to talk about it.

Ms McDONALD: The ballot for the MPT was held last week for both Darwin and Alice Springs.

Mrs LAMBLEY: What does MPT stand for?

Ms LAWLER: Multipurpose taxis.

Mrs LAMBLEY: How many ballots was that?

Ms McDONALD: It was 10 in Darwin and five in Alice Springs.

Mrs LAMBLEY: My question is on the implementation of that recommendation. Is the government still committed to lifting the cap and deregulating the taxi industry as recommended in that PAC report from 2017?

Ms LAWLER: That recommendation is for the cap on taxi numbers in Darwin and Alice Springs to be relaxed in a controlled manner over the medium term and removed in the longer term. This will occur via a staged implementation over a five-year period commencing in 2022. A taxi ballot will be advertised, as we have heard.

This is in progress. It will not be completed until about 2026 or when there is no further demand for taxi licences. The taxi licence cap for Alice Springs and Darwin is scheduled to be removed in 2026 or 2027 unless the annual ballots between 2022 and 2026 show that there is no demand for taxi licences in that region, whichever comes first.

Yes, will be the answer. It will be done in a staged way. If we get to the stage where there is no demand for taxi licences, it will be removed.

Mrs LAMBLEY: I find that difficult to understand because while you have a regulated taxi licence system in place there will always be a demand for taxi licences. That does not make sense to me. Can you explain that?

Ms LAWLER: It might be. I do not know how much interest we have had in Darwin and Alice Springs for taxi licences.

Ms McDONALD: We had quite a lot of interest in Darwin and Alice Springs.

Mrs LAMBLEY: How many people were in the ballot? How many applications were in each ballot?

Ms McDONALD: We will take that one on notice.

Question on Notice No 2.24

Mr CHAIR: Member for Araluen, please restate the question for the record.

Mrs LAMBLEY: How many applicants were involved in the most recent taxi ballot for Darwin and Alice Springs?

Mr CHAIR: Minister, do you accept the question?

Ms LAWLER: Yes.

Mr CHAIR: The question asked by the Member for Araluen has been allocated the number 2.24.

Mrs LAMBLEY: When was that plan made?

Ms LAWLER: The taxi licences will be released by a ballot over a staged period each year for a five-year period. This the work of government. The issue then is if there is no more demand or we get to the stage where we are not seeing a lot of interest, the cap will be removed earlier than in 2027.

Mrs LAMBLEY: Can you explain that to me?

Ms LAWLER: The cap will be removed in 2027 unless the annual ballots between 2022 and 2026 show that there is no demand for taxi licences in that region and no interest in it. I was just asking Cindy whether there was strong interest, as I do not have anything to do with these issues.

Mrs LAMBLEY: There is only interest in it because that is a requirement. If you do not have taxi licences, you will have no interest in it.

Ms LAWLER: There might be people who do not want a licence. We may get to the stage where the market is saturated and people are using point-to-point travel instead, so there may not be a demand for taxi licences at some stage in Alice Springs or Darwin.

Mrs LAMBLEY: I can assure you from having so much contact with the taxi industry for the best part of 10 years that will never happen.

Answer to Question on Notice No 2.24

Ms McDONALD: A total of 48 ballot applications had been received. Tier one in Darwin had 26; tier two in Darwin had five; tier one in Alice Springs had 15; and tier two in Alice Springs had two.

Ms LAWLER: I will pass to Louise McCormick who can provide added information.

Ms McCORMICK: I have had a lot of history with this, given my previous roles. The cap on taxi numbers has been through a bit of a rollercoaster. When the review was originally touted to be in force, it was the review after ride sharing was put in place and the impact on taxi numbers.

Not long after that, COVID-19 happened and again it was not a true reflection of what the taxi demand would be. At the moment when we do the ballots, we are targeting disabled taxis because the demand for disabled taxis has increased.

The demand we are talking about is possibly related to disabled taxis because they are regulated, but also looking at where ride sharing is going in that space. It needs continual monitoring because there have been a lot of impacts that may impact government decision-making on removing the cap.

Mr CHAIR: That now concludes questions on agency-related and whole-of-government questions.

OUTPUT GROUP 12.0 – INFRASTRUCTURE NT
Output 12.1 – Infrastructure NT Policy and Development

Mr CHAIR: We move to Output Group 12.0, Infrastructure NT, and Output 12.1, Infrastructure NT Policy and Development.

Answer to Question on Notice No 2.18

Ms LAWLER: As of 30 May, \$227,509.01 was spent on the bus ferrying service into Palmerston, Casuarina and the city; and \$120,990.95 was spent on the school bus service.

Ms LAWLER: I can table those figures, if you like?

Mr CHAIR: That would be good if we could table those please, minister.

Mr MALEY: In relation to Tiger Brennan Drive, what has been the total cost blowout on that project so far?

Ms LAWLER: I know that you do not like Tiger Brennan, but I am proud of it and pleased as a Palmerston resident. I am surprised, as a rural resident who travels on that road—I travel in every day. It is an amazing build.

Mr MALEY: I am just talking about the cost blowout. We have limited time, so can you talk about that?

Ms LAWLER: It is fascinating to watch Sitzler at the work it is doing every day. The total cost at this stage is \$165m. This needs to be done. It will be a great result when it is finished. Nobody remembers how much Bagot Road cost. Nobody will remember how much Tiger Brennan cost, except you. We know that you do not like that project. We are proud of it.

Mr MALEY: Can we get back to what the blowout was?

Mr CHAIR: The question from the Member for Nelson is about the increase on the original cost of the project.

Ms LAWLER: That project has been complex because of the design work. We used early contractor involvement with Sitzler, which was awarded the contract on 20 August.

I will pass to Louise McCormick, who can provide more information.

Ms McCORMICK: Tiger Brennan is another project I have had a long history with. This project has an early contractor involvement. The original contract was based on a very early concept design. The original award was \$61.5m; however, as we progressed through the design and how we would construct the project, it became clear that we would have to impact additional intersections. You probably have seen some of our variable message boards talking about Wishart Road upgrades needed. As we have closed Berrimah Road, there is significant impact on commuter traffic. We had to increase the scope of that work from the original early concept design.

Other issues that have impacted that project include cost escalation, which has been an issue across the infrastructure program with material increases and labour force shortages, including having to pay a premium to keep people on jobs so that we can finish those jobs. Essentially there was scope increase to ensure we can manage traffic as well as current increases in construction cost.

Mr MALEY: When you say there is an increase in scope and are talking about the Wishart Road upgrades, surely that would have been foreseen. The traffic management was there; we know how many people. We always knew that road would be shut from the school up Berrimah Road. How can that be an increase in scope when you already knew that would happen, or did you not foresee you would have to shut that road?

Ms McCORMICK: The original concept was done in the 1980s; that is how old it is. There were two concepts: one where Berrimah Road went over Tiger Brennan Drive; and one where Tiger Brennan Drive went over Berrimah Road. We did not have enough detail at that time to determine the impacts without the traffic modelling that occurred as part of stage one of the contract. That is the whole point of an early contractor involvement. This is a complex project that needs input from the contractor to be able to manage that well

during construction. From concepts in the 1980s to the current network, we needed input from the contractor to award the final construction contract.

Mr MALEY: You are saying that a design from the 1980s was used for the original tender?

Ms McCORMICK: Yes.

Mr MALEY: Would you not think that would be a bit out of date? You mentioned material and labour costs. I am not sure what it was in the 1980s, but it would have been a lot less.

Ms McCORMICK: That is exactly what I am saying. With an early contractor involvement we provide the contractor all the work we have to date, and that is when those original designs were done. When I did the extension of Tiger Brennan Drive, we relooked at those designs. They were similar. Without a contractor and designer on board—we gave them everything we had to date, but that was part of the tender they were awarded.

Mr MALEY: They were originally awarded the \$61m. I still do not understand how it got up to \$165m in the blink of an eye when you say it started in 1980. Can you explain how it went from \$61m to \$165m? I am getting at the fact that \$100m of work has not been out to tender. For the section you talked about there were select tenders—the two of them onto the Stuart Highway. They were not tendered in the open process. There is basically \$100m being spent that has not been tendered. Can you explain why that happened?

Ms McCORMICK: It has been tendered. Sitzler won that through a competitive tendering process.

Mr MALEY: At \$61.5m?

Ms McCORMICK: Yes.

Mr MALEY: Now it is \$165m. The \$100m increase has not been tendered. It won the first one at \$61m. There would have been various tenders and it won it at \$61m ...

Ms LAWLER: Your lack of understanding of tender processes and infrastructure always astounds me. Sitzler won the original tender. Would you be saying to Sitzler, 'No, we are taking it back?' I do not understand your line of reasoning at all. Early contractor involvement ...

Mr MALEY: How can you, as the minister, foresee \$100m being spent without an open tender being put out?

Ms LAWLER: Sitzler had won it as an early contractor involvement tender.

Mr MALEY: There was \$100m spent.

Ms LAWLER: Sitzler won that initial tender, the early contractor involvement. As the name 'early contractor involvement' suggests, you get the contractor in, it does that work and then that is what happens. As Louise has just explained to you, that design work ...

Mr MALEY: Do you think it is acceptable that it has gone up \$100m?

Ms LAWLER: Yes, it was acceptable that it has gone up \$100m because the design work has necessitated that. The new design, the work that is going in there and we have seen cost increases—there is a variety of reasons that the cost has gone up.

Anybody who drives past on any given day can see the huge amount of work that is going into that build.

Mr MALEY: Let us get back to the two select tenders, which is where Wishart joins the Stuart Highway and Amy Johnson joins the Stuart Highway. Those two tenders were done as select tenders all involved in that original tender, yet they are at least five or six kilometres away.

Let us talk about Amy Johnson to start with. You drive from Tiger Brennan Drive and go up to where the Stuart Highway is, then you keep going up towards where the airplanes fly in. That intersection was recently upgraded and it was a select tender. Is that correct?

Ms McCORMICK: No, that is not correct.

Mr MALEY: What is correct?

Ms McCORMICK: The Sitzler one is part of the publicly advertised tender that was developed as part of the scope. That was developed as part of the ...

Ms LAWLER: You need to go back to the people who are giving you information, Gerard, and tell them that the best thing to do would be to come and talk to Louise McCormick.

Mr MALEY: It is your written question, so your written questions are wrong. Anyway, I am not talking about that. Let us talk about the question.

Mr CHAIR: You need to address members by their title for the record please, minister.

Mr MALEY: Let us talk about where Wishart joins the Stuart Highway. Are you saying that is not a select tender?

Ms McCORMICK: It does not actually join the Stuart Highway. Wishart Road joins Tiger Brennan Drive.

Mr MALEY: What goes up past the old prison? What is that intersection?

Ms McCORMICK: It is Tivendale Road. The work I am talking about is the Wishart Road/Tiger Brennan Drive intersection.

Mr MALEY: I am talking about the one where Tivendale—I got the name wrong; I apologise for that—joins the Stuart Highway.

Ms McCORMICK: It is a similar situation to Wishart Road where, as part of the traffic management and commuter traffic, we have to upgrade those intersections.

Mr MALEY: Was doing those two intersections part of the original \$61m? There will be ...

Ms McCORMICK: No, they were not. That was the scope increase that happened as part of the design development.

Mr MALEY: That is what I am getting at. Did the \$61m not include those two intersections?

Ms McCORMICK: That is right.

Mr MALEY: They were given to Sitzler. Did no-one else tender for those? It got the job to do those intersections. Is that correct?

Ms McCORMICK: That was part of the original tender, yes.

Mr MALEY: I thought you said it was not part of the original tender.

Ms McCORMICK: I will start again. An early contractor involvement contract is where you get the contractor and designer on board and give them all the information we have in the department to date. As part of the first stage of that tender, you actually work through what that design is. You do all the investigations and environmental approvals. Through that process with Sitzler, which won the publicly advertised tender, was where the scope increase was realised because of the traffic management impacts of that particular grade separation project.

Mr MALEY: That was not foreseen by the department in the original tender?

Ms McCORMICK: No, it was not.

Mr MALEY: Those tenders that were Sitzler—when it won the original \$61m tender, did it not have in there that it would upgrade those intersections? After Sitzler won that, it said, 'Now we have looked at it, there will be traffic management. We need to do those two intersections and we will do them at a rate.' There were no other tenders for that; it just got the job. That is what I am getting at.

Ms McCORMICK: Essentially, yes, that is the process of an ECI contract.

Mr MALEY: Was there no tender process for those two intersections? Were they done as a variation to the original tender given to Sitzler?

Ms McCORMICK: As part of the ECI project we look at awarding stage two of that tender. That was where it was awarded, through the ECI process.

Mr MALEY: Now the tender has stage one and stage two in it?

Ms McCORMICK: Yes, all ECI contracts do.

Mr MALEY: The minister spoke about an escalation of material and labour costs of \$100m. That is a lot of increased material and labour. What part of the \$100m was those two aspects of it?

Ms McCORMICK: That \$100m increase was the scope increase we just spoke about at the intersections. If you go to Infrastructure Australia's market capacity research across the nation, you will see most infrastructure contracts have increased by at least 30%. That includes both material and labour costs. That is essentially where some of that \$100m comes into it, but the additional part is the intersection upgrades.

To add to that, we employ as part of the project an independent cost estimator to ensure we are getting value for money from the project.

Answer to Question on Notice No 2.20

Ms LAWLER: There have been 48 change orders. System variations have been issued on the Alice Springs Youth Detention Centre contract.

Answer to Question on Notice No 2.19

Ms LAWLER: Expenditure on the Alice Springs youth justice centre to 31 March 2023 was \$24,651,257.19.

Mr CHAIR: Would you like to table those?

Ms LAWLER: Yes.

Mrs HERSEY: Is the chief executive on leave or has he resigned?

Ms LAWLER: That is probably none of your business, but he is on recreation leave. I do not know what that has to do with the Estimates process, but Andrew Kirkman is on long service leave. He has worked for seven years while I have been Infrastructure minister and he worked on the SIHIP process before that. He has done 10 years of very hard work. I do not know what business it has to do with you at all.

Mr CHAIR: Speculation on a public servant's tenure is not in line with Standing Order 109, so it is not a question. That individual is on leave, as has been said. We are not going to bring people in and make insinuations about their employment in front of this committee.

Member for Katherine, your questions will be in line with Standing Order 109 when you ask them. I see the Member for Nelson is nodding, so you can do the same.

Ms LAWLER: I am hoping the whole public service is listening to the questions from the Member for Katherine today.

Answer to Question on Notice No 2.22

Ms LAWLER: The signs are currently covered under defects, liabilities and warranties, so there is no cost.

Mr MALEY: Can you give us an update on the Mandorah Jetty project?

Ms LAWLER: I will pass to Louise McCormick for an update.

Ms McCORMICK: The upgrade of Mandorah Jetty is happening as part of the Infrastructure NT work. We tendered the project some time ago. Unfortunately, one of those tenders was double the budget we had and the other company withdrew its tender, so we had to readvertise that tender.

Between the first one and the current one under assessment, we looked at how we could encourage the market to participate in that project because it is complex. We gave alternative options for contractors if they only wanted to do the construction rather than the design as well.

We are currently under assessment for the tender, so I cannot speak to that.

Mr MALEY: Have you settled on a particular design yet?

Ms McCORMICK: We have a concept design that has been released to the public. It has two rock groynes, a new ferry terminal as well as a jetty. We are doing early works for an existing building for a terminal.

Mr MALEY: Can you give me an update on the ship lift?

Ms McCORMICK: For the Darwin ship lift project we are getting to the final stages of awarding a construction contract. Most recently we have been meeting with ship lift and transfer system vendors that all come from overseas. They presented to us, as well as Paspaley and Defence, on what type of ship lift system we may procure. In the next few weeks we will be going to those three vendors with request for offers on those three systems. The construction contract itself, we are finishing off the due diligence as a result of the Clough administration. We are now re-engaging with Clough-BMD Joint Venture in terms of where we may head with a construction contract, but I cannot talk to it in any more than that detail as it is commercial-in-confidence.

Mr MALEY: Has Clough going into administration made a difference to the delivery date of the project?

Ms McCORMICK: It has impacted and delayed the contract. We have been talking with Defence about that because the facility is important for them for lifting of grey boats and maintenance as they move out of the Coonawarra facility. It has about six months' worth of delay. We are working out how we can recoup some of that time.

Mr MALEY: You are saying only six months of delay. Will that be all and nothing further?

Ms McCORMICK: I cannot speak to that at this point because we have not even got into construction yet, and all sorts of things happen during construction. At this time, there should not be any anticipated delays.

Mr MALEY: Do we know who the contractor will be? Is it Webuild? Has it bought Clough's share in that joint venture?

Ms McCORMICK: Webuild now owns Clough 100%, but it is still trading as Clough.

Mr MALEY: How much money has been spent so far on that project?

Ms McCORMICK: We have \$515m in total in the budget. We have spent about \$14m this year to 31 March. That includes all the consultants; we have had to do due diligence. We had to change Deloitte out to EY to do our due diligence from a financial commercial perspective. We also have MinterEllison as our legal advisers. They are structuring the contracts with the different entities we are working with, as well as site costs. We have a site office at East Arm near the ship lift. They are the main costs to date as well as design.

Mrs LAMBLEY: What is the time frame? When did it start? When did you start spending the \$14m?

Ms McCORMICK: Expenditure for the ship lift started at the end of 2020 when MinterEllison was brought on board as well as Deloitte.

Ms LAWLER: I would love to get on the record the Auditor-General's report from August 2018 around the ship lift and the \$100m, because often the Member for Nelson talks about value for money and the work undertaken by our government. The comment on page 110 says:

No valuation basis was provided to support the value of \$100 million available for the Project as announced by the Chief Minister in 2015 as the decision to offer up to \$100 million was premised upon the availability of funds rather than the cost of the project. No cost benefit modelling was performed,

before or after the announcement, to determine the effect on return that would result from the decision to invest up to \$100 million.

Member for Nelson, sometimes you are critical of our government, but there was an Auditor's report that said the \$100m for the ship lift was plucked out of the air by the Adam Giles government.

Mr MALEY: I wonder where the value for money for half a billion dollars will be then.

Mr CHAIR: Members and minister, the time has expired. We are now at five o'clock. That concludes consideration of outputs relating to the Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Logistics.

On behalf of the committee, I thank the minister for appearing and all the officials for their patience as we went through this afternoon.

This concludes the Estimates hearing for today. Hearings will recommence on Thursday at 8.30 am with questions for the Minister for Police, Fire and Emergency Services.

Ms LAWLER: I thank the hardworking Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Logistics staff, particularly those back at the agency as well.

The committee concluded.
