

The committee convened at 8.30 am.

Mr CHAIR: Good morning, everybody. It being 8.30 am we will begin our estimates for the day with the Department of the Attorney-General and Justice.

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

MINISTER PAECH'S PORTFOLIOS

DEPARTMENT OF THE ATTORNEY-GENERAL AND JUSTICE

Mr CHAIR: Attorney-General, welcome. I invite you to introduce your officials and make a brief opening statement. I will then call for questions relating to the statement. The committee will then consider any whole-of-government budget and fiscal strategy-related questions before moving on to the output-specific questions, and finally the non-output specific questions.

I will invite the shadow minister to ask their questions first followed by other committee members and any other members who are attending. It is generally accepted that we will go with a line of questioning instead of waiting until the end.

A couple of admin things: can we please make sure our microphones are on, which is the light is on; and please speak clearly because that will help Hansard and anyone else listening. It may have been me mumbling yesterday, but it may have been someone else—you never know.

Mr PAECH: Mr Chair, I acknowledge the Larrakia people and the First Nations people across the Northern Territory whose land we all work on every day.

Today I have with me Gemma Lake, Chief Executive Officer of the Department of the Attorney-General and Justice; Leonique Swart, Deputy Chief Executive Officer; Alecia Brimson, Chief Operating Officer; Craig Smyth, Executive Director Legal Services; and Jenny Daniel-Yee, Director Legal Policy.

I will not be providing an opening statement. It is important to provide the Estimates Committee with the opportunity to work through each of the outputs today.

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

Mr CHAIR: We will move directly to consider the estimates and proposed expenditure contained in the Appropriation Bill 2022–23 that relate to the Department of the Attorney-General and Justice.

No questions.

OUTPUT GROUP 1.0 – LEGAL SERVICES Output 1.1 – Solicitor for the Northern Territory

Mr EDGINGTON: How many staff are in the office of the Solicitor for the Northern Territory?

Mr PAECH: There are 63.45.

Mr EDGINGTON: That is half a person.

Mr PAECH: It is 63 positions.

Mr EDGINGTON: How many of those are vacant?

Ms LAKE: I will need to take that on notice.

Question on Notice No 6.1

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

Mr EDGINGTON: How many vacancies are there in the office of the Solicitor for the Northern Territory?

Mr CHAIR: Minister, do you accept the question?

Mr PAECH: Yes.

Mr CHAIR: The question asked by the Member for Barkly has been allocated number 6.1.

Mr EDGINGTON: What was the total amount paid out in judgments and settlements by the Territory government in the last 12 months?

Mr PAECH: We do not keep those figures because they are paid out by individual departments.

Mr EDGINGTON: Are the cases managed within the office of the Solicitor for the Northern Territory? Are they not out-posted?

Mr PAECH: Some are and some are not.

Mr EDGINGTON: Could we put that on notice, given that you may be able to answer part of the question?

Mr PAECH: It depends. Do you want half the answer?

Mr EDGINGTON: Perhaps in the answer you can tell us which part you cannot answer. If there are judgments paid out within the office of the Solicitor for the Northern Territory we would like to know how much, in the current reporting period.

Mr PAECH: The Department of the Attorney General and Justice would not pay for those cases. We would only be able to provide figures on what we have engaged in and paid for.

Mr EDGINGTON: Perhaps nothing has been paid out of the Solicitor for the Northern Territory office?

Mr PAECH: That is unlikely.

Mr EDGINGTON: Can we have a definite position? Has any money been paid out of the office of the Solicitor for the Northern Territory?

Mr PAECH: I am happy to take that on notice.

Question on Notice No 6.2

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

Mr EDGINGTON: How much in total was paid out in judgments and settlements by the Solicitor for the Northern Territory in the current reporting period?

Mr CHAIR: Minister, do you accept the question?

Mr PAECH: Yes.

Mr CHAIR: The question asked by the Member for Barkly has been allocated number 6.2.

Mr EDGINGTON: How many civil actions were initiated by the Territory government in the past 12 months?

Mr PAECH: In the Supreme Court and Federal Court, commenced against the NTA, there are 19 proceedings: five federal and 14 Supreme Court.

Mr EDGINGTON: Can you give a summary of what those civil actions relate to?

Mr SMYTH: There are a variety of matters, as you would expect. I could summarise them but a number relate to challenges to the Chief Health Officer's Directions.

Mr EDGINGTON: How many relate to challenging the Chief Health Officer Directions?

Mr SMYTH: Two, primarily. There are also two matters involving challenges to the ICAC and ICAC decisions.

There are number of judicial review matters involving various challenges to administrative decisions. One involves Fortune Agribusiness and the water allocation extraction licence in Singleton; another one involves a land claim; and there has been a number of other minor matters, statutory appeals and so on, against decisions of the Police Commissioner or NT Worksafe.

Mr EDGINGTON: We are talking about a small number. Could we just have the subject of each claim?

Mr PAECH: In order to respond to your question comprehensively, it is best to take that question on notice.

Question on Notice No 6.3

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

Mr EDGINGTON: How many civil claims were initiated against the Territory in the past 12 months? What is the subject of those civil actions?

Mr CHAIR: Minister, do you accept the question?

Mr PAECH: Yes.

Mr CHAIR: The question asked by the Member for Barkly has been allocated number 6.3.

Mr EDGINGTON: How much money has been spent on outside counsel in the last 12 months or in the reporting period?

Mr PAECH: I am sourcing the figure of the legal costs. We will be able to provide that to you shortly.

Mr EDGINGTON: How many civil actions were commenced by the Territory in the last 12 months?

Mr PAECH: We will take that question on notice.

Question on Notice No 6.4

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

Mr EDGINGTON: How many civil actions were commenced by the Territory in the last 12 months?

Mr CHAIR: Minister, do you accept the question?

Mr PAECH: Yes.

Mr CHAIR: The question asked by the Member for Barkly has been allocated number 6.4.

Mr EDGINGTON: Do we have how much was spent on outside counsel?

Mr PAECH: That figure is \$2.493m.

Mr EDGINGTON: What was the number of outside counsels engaged through that \$2.493m?

Mr PAECH: Forty seven.

Mr EDGINGTON: How many of those are outside of the Northern Territory, from interstate?

Mr PAECH: Thirty two matters were briefed to interstate counsel and 66 matters were briefed to local counsel.

Mr EDGINGTON: Chargeable hours were a bit lower than previous years, by about 2,500 hours. Are there reasons why?

Mr PAECH: I am happy to take that on notice.

Question on Notice No 6.5

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

Mr EDGINGTON: Chargeable hours were quite a bit lower than the previous year, by about 2,500 hours. What are the reasons why those hours might be down by a significant amount?

Mr CHAIR: Minister, do you accept the question?

Mr PAECH: Yes.

Mr CHAIR: The question asked by the Member for Barkly has been allocated number 6.5.

Mr EDGINGTON: Was the \$35m settlement for Don Dale part of the list of settlements for civil actions?

Mr PAECH: That figure was paid by Territory Families.

Mr EDGINGTON: Are you aware of how many action class members received payment?

Mr PAECH: That would be a question for the Minister for Territory Families.

Output 1.2 – Legal Policy

Mr EDGINGTON: How many referrals were there to the NT Law Reform Committee in the last 12 months and what was the subject of those referrals?

Mr PAECH: There were zero.

Mr EDGINGTON: How many pieces of legislation are in the pipeline? Can you briefly describe the subject matter of those bills?

Mr PAECH: The Territory Labor government is committed to sentencing reform that improves community safety, puts victims first and breaks the cycle of crime. We want sentences to be appropriate to the crime, and programs which address the root causes of crime. A cross-agency sentencing reform implementation group has been established to develop reform proposals of mandatory sentencing provisions, including community-based sentences and offender programs. As part of this reform, evidence-based rehabilitation and behavioural change programs and alternatives to custody facilities will be established to deliver appropriate sentencing options. This reform progresses the government's commitments under the Aboriginal Justice Agreement and will be informed by the NT Law Reform Committee's report on Mandatory Sentencing and Community-Based Sentencing Options.

The Attorney-General's department has conducted a review of the Criminal Code property offences and penalties. I expect a bill to be introduced to the Legislative Assembly later this year. The bill will bring property offences under the operation of the criminal responsibility rules, Part IIAA of the Criminal Code. The bill has been informed by several rounds of targeted stakeholder consultation, including two exposure draft bills and a discussion paper.

The Attorney-General's department is preparing a report for consultation, which is expected to be released in June of this year. The report will outline reforms to address coercive control; legislative proposals to improve responses to domestic and family violence; and non-legislative proposals to improve the justice responses to domestic and family violence, including improved cross-agency coordination.

Our government is committed to raising the age of criminal responsibility in this term of government. Raising the minimum age of criminal responsibility to 12 is not new, it was a royal commission recommendation. We accepted it when the royal commission recommendations were introduced.

This term we will contemporise the *Anti-Discrimination Act*, which should be before the House soon.

Mr EDGINGTON: Crime rates appear to continue growing. After two years of worst crime experienced in the Territory over our 40-odd year history, what policies will you pursue to lower offending, particularly youth offending?

Mr PAECH: In relation to the Appropriation Bill and the money in this budget, the Aboriginal Justice Agreement will continue to be a key feature of the Territory Labor government's response to a reduction in reoffending and rehabilitation. In this budget and in Output Group 2.0, funds are brought forward to assist with the delivery of services in correctional centres across the Northern Territory, which is important in the development of reintegration and rehabilitation programs for reduction in recidivism.

Work on programs and supports for youth is being done across all government agencies, particularly in the Attorney-General and Justice, and Territory Families departments. There is significant work being undertaken to combat the levels of antisocial behaviour across the Territory.

Mr EDGINGTON: Recently the Labor government voted down laws that would have added a consequence of imprisonment for assaults on police and Territory workers. How will you protect workers and prevent assaults, which happen nearly every day?

Mr PAECH: There was a debate in parliament; Minister Manison participated. She was clear that the Territory Labor government was working on reform in that area. We will have a bill before the Assembly to increase penalties for assaults, spitting and so forth on frontline officers. We value our hardworking Police, Fire and Emergency Services. We commit to that reform and bringing in those penalties.

Mr EDGINGTON: When can we expect to see that?

Mr PAECH: That work is under way. It will be before the House as soon as practicable.

Mr EDGINGTON: What do you mean by 'as soon as practicable'? Is it this year, next year or the year after?

Mr PAECH: There is a workload before the Parliamentary Counsel from drafting instructions it received from Cabinet. I will work with them to make sure it is a priority of this government and will be before the Assembly as soon as practicable.

Mr EDGINGTON: With regard to assaults on police and workers, some of the penalties relate to spitting, which happens on a regular basis.

Mr PAECH: Spitting will be incorporated; there will be penalties. My intention is that the bill will be before the Assembly this year.

Mr EDGINGTON: The Territory has mandatory sentencing for the most violent and abhorrent crimes such as murder and rape. Do you agree with the new Chief Minister that we should scrap mandatory sentencing, potentially allowing convicted murderers and rapists to walk free with a slap on the wrist?

Mr PAECH: That statement is incorrect. That is not the intention of the Chief Minister. We made a commitment to work through the Northern Territory Law Reforms Committee's report on Mandatory Sentencing and Community-Based Sentencing Options. That is not about those offences. It is about the lower end of mandatory sentences, which need to be reviewed. We will continue to work with them on that report and reform in that area.

Mr EDGINGTON: Mandatory sentencing will continue for offences such as murder and rape?

Mr PAECH: Yes. It is important to be clear when we talk about mandatory sentencing. The Northern Territory Labor government is embarking on a staged approach to sentencing reform. Mandatory sentencing will remain in place. This is about the lower end of offences on the mandatory sentencing schedule, where we can give our courts and judges autonomy back to make decisions in the courtroom. People will not be automatically incarcerated when they could be given an alternative community-based sentencing option.

Mr EDGINGTON: Even at the lower level, many Aboriginal people are in custody for driving offences, for example. What work is being done on alternatives to custody for low-level offenders?

Mr PAECH: In line with the Aboriginal Justice Agreement we are exploring a range of alternatives to custody. The alternatives to custody facility for women in Alice Springs is a successful program to date; a facility is due to open next year in the Groote Eylandt archipelago; and we continue to look at alternatives to custody options and models across the Territory.

We are looking at alternatives to custody for the male population through the Aboriginal Justice Agreement, such as fines for offences and driving offences. Coming into this portfolio, I am interested in looking at a range of programs and options for people whilst in custody, being deferred or referred to a driver education program to understand driving offences and their repercussions.

Mr EDGINGTON: What work is being done to ensure that non-violent first-time adult offenders are provided with rehabilitative alternatives to prison while ensuring that violent and repeat offenders receive a punitive prison term? You touched on some of those issues. I am aware of the program in Alice Springs, it appears to be working well. What is going on for men, besides Groote Eylandt coming up?

Mr PAECH: The Aboriginal Justice Agreement and the government's team are looking at alternatives to custody facilities across the Northern Territory and what options are available for an alternative to incarceration, whether in the Katherine or the southern regions you and I call home.

It is part of the broader range of reform on first-time offences—the programs and therapeutic front and centre and requires a significant amount of ongoing work. With the hard-working and dedicated professionals in the Aboriginal Justice Unit and within the Department of the Attorney-General and Justice as a whole alternatives are front and centre of everyone's mind. We are looking at program development for therapeutic alternative programs rather than incarceration; and programs while people are in a correctional facility, aimed at correcting behaviours which led an individual to incarceration in the first place.

We are looking at reform. It is about giving judges options to exercise their discretion with first-time offenders versus repeat offenders. It is a huge volume of work that is progressing at a pace I am comfortable with.

Mr EDGINGTON: It sounds promising that those programs are under way. What is the budget commitment?

Mr PAECH: The funding is split over a variety of funding streams across the agency. There is money in this budget for proceeding further with the Aboriginal Justice Agreement and in Correctional Services.

If you do not mind me building on your previous question, as we work through with the law reform report and options for reform for first-time offences and repeal of elements of mandatory sentencing, we will need to look at where the gaps are and what programs need to be. The agency will work on the costing. A number of exciting programs in Corrections are part of the ongoing budget. Funding is already in Attorney-General and Justice, in Corrections and the Aboriginal Justice Agreement. We will be looking at that. There will be future budget considerations regarding therapeutic programs when the law reform work is done—or it may look at diversion programs.

Mr EDGINGTON: What will be the impact of lifting the age of criminal responsibility to 12?

Mr PAECH: I made a public commitment and have been in the media about this. It is my intention this term, as soon as practicable, to raise the age of criminal responsibility to 12. That is in line with the recommendations from the royal commission. My understanding is that impact is minimal. The hard data would need to be obtained by the Minister for Territory Families regarding the number of young people who enter the system.

Mr EDGINGTON: Given your commitment, what will this government be doing with offenders who have not reached the age of 12?

Mr PAECH: There is a range of therapeutic interventions and responses that can be exercised for young people under the age of 12 when criminal responsibility comes into effect. The Minister for Territory Families has been undertaking a volume of reform work in preparation. I am comfortable with how that is progressing.

Mr EDGINGTON: From global events, what would your response be to an 11-year-old who may be charged with a serious offence such as murder? What would happen then?

Mr CHAIR: Member for Barkly, I remind you about asking hypothetical questions and asking for opinions—the manner of former questions.

Mr EDGINGTON: Perhaps I will make it more direct. What will happen if a young child is charged with an offence such as murder?

Mr PAECH: That question would be best directed to the Minister for Territory Families. Minister Worden will be able to provide you with a wholesome overview of the process and what programs would be available for the individual you are referencing.

Mr EDGINGTON: We often hear the term 'early intervention and prevention'. How many family responsibility agreements and/or orders have been taken out by your government in the past year?

Mr PAECH: We are committed to early interventions, preventative programs and looking at diversion as a successful way of addressing behaviours. In relation to the statistics, that question should be directed to the Minister for Territory Families.

Mr EDGINGTON: There has been a dramatic increase in strict liability offences in recent years. Can you please outline what considerations are taken into account when determining whether a new or amended offence should be one of strict liability?

Mr PAECH: It would be most appropriate if I take the question on notice in order to give you the most accurate information.

Question on Notice No 6.6

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

Mr EDGINGTON: There has been an increase in strict liability offences in recent years. Can you please outline what considerations are taken into account when determining whether a new or amended offence should be one of strict liability?

Mr CHAIR: Minister, do you accept the question?

Mr PAECH: Yes.

Mr CHAIR: The question asked by the Member for Barkly has been allocated number 6.6.

Mr EDGINGTON: In 2017 the former Chief Minister said that the justice system was broken, referring in part to the use of spit hoods on kids. However, a report by the *NT News* revealed that spit hoods were used 27 times on children over the past four years. What do you intend to do as Attorney-General to fix this Labor-induced broken youth justice system?

Mr PAECH: This question is best directed to the Minister for Police, Fire and Emergency Services, who has carriage of youth justice. Since coming to government in 2016, the Territory Labor government has been committed to law reform, strengthening the Territory's justice system and building on it. That has been driven by expert advice and consultations with many people in the legal community.

Mr EDGINGTON: What is the government's policy on the use of spit hoods?

Mr PAECH: That is a question for Minister Worden. She has made it clear that work is being undertaken.

Mr EDGINGTON: The policy sits with Territory Families. It is not a general government policy?

Mr PAECH: Minister Worden is responsible for Police, Fire and Emergency Services, and youth justice, which is a Territory Families agency. It would best if Minister Worden was provided with the opportunity to respond.

Mr EDGINGTON: I am giving you the opportunity to respond. What is the government's policy regarding the use of spit hoods, whether for youths or adults?

Mr PAECH: I have answered the question.

Mr EDGINGTON: What role did the Attorney-General's department have in the review of the ICAC Act undertaken by the former CEO? What role will AGD have in implementing the recommendations?

Mr PAECH: We provided input to DCM. That was the extent of the agency's involvement.

Mr EDGINGTON: Has the Attorney-General's department or you received a copy of the ICAC review?

Mr PAECH: No. The review has not come across my desk at this stage. I am happy to take that question on notice.

Mr BARKLY: Has the Attorney-General's department received a copy of the ICAC review? If so, could you please table a copy of that review?

Mr CHAIR: Minister, do you accept the question?

Mr PAECH: I am happy to accept the first half, but it would not be appropriate for me to table that report.

Question on Notice No 6.7

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

Mr BARKLY: Has the Attorney-General's department received a copy of the ICAC review report?

Mr CHAIR: Minister, do you accept the question?

Mr PAECH: Yes.

Mr CHAIR: The question asked by the Member for Barkly has been allocated number 6.7.

Answer to Question on Notice No 6.1

Mr PAECH: The question was about the vacancies in the office of in the Solicitor for the Northern Territory. There are seven vacancies, all within the commercial division of the Solicitor for the Northern Territory. Recruitment is under way for four and complete for one, to be filled by 4 July. There are three ECO positions: one is on higher duties; one is on parental leave; and one is advertised. There is one P3 position, which is advertised; one P1/P2, which is advertised; and two AO3s, one vacant and one recruited to, with a commencement date of 4 July.

Mr EDGINGTON: This might come up in policy, but tell me if we can ask it further on—perhaps in custodial services. In May 2020 a riot occurred under the Labor government's watch at the Holtze prison, causing at least \$30m in damages. Professor John Paget prepared a report, which was given to the Ombudsman in 2020. Two years' on that report has still not been released to the public. Can you explain why?

Mr PAECH: That is for Output 2.0. I am more than happy to respond to that question then.

Answer to Question on Notice No 6.5

Mr PAECH: Due to the number of vacant positions, the division also experienced an increase in personal leave due to COVID.

Mr GUYULA: In April, the ABC reported that NT Legal Aid Commission was no longer able to take on new bush court cases due to funding constraints. Are you able to advise if the NT Legal Aid Commission has been able to resume bush court work?

Mr PAECH: The Local Court circuits to 30 bush court locations from three of its main centres: Darwin, Alice Springs and Katherine. Circuits can range from three to four days per month and one day every four months. Judges in the Top End generally fly to circuits; judges at Alice Springs travel by vehicle; and the judge at

Katherine is a mixture of flying and driving. Legal and support services generally travel either the day before or on the day of court.

Prosecutions are done by either the local police or a member of the prosecution staff in one of the main areas. Caution has been exercised that legal services and court personnel do not travel in the same aircraft or vehicles together, due to the perception of bias. Generally, at least two Local Court judges are engaged in bush courts at any time. Circuit courts require two court support staff to travel to each centre. There are about 10,000 listings per annum at circuit courts, which represents about 18% of the Local Courts' overall work, and about 25% of all court lodgements are commenced at circuit courts.

Earlier this year the NT Legal Aid Commission advised that it would no longer provide representation on bush court circuits, quoting funding restraints. NTLAC—NT Legal Aid Commission—has an arrangement with NAAJA—North Australian Aboriginal Justice Agency—where NAAJA refers conflicted matters to the NT Legal Aid Commission. Our department has been working collaboratively with the NT Legal Aid Commission and NAAJA on this issue. It will need to involve the Commonwealth as it provides funding under the NLAP.

The department has agreed to provide NT Legal Aid additional funds of \$1.7m this financial year. As the Territory's newest Attorney-General it is a matter that I wish to discuss in more detail with Mark Dreyfus, the Australian Attorney-General—about the unique makeup of the Territory and how our funding arrangements need to be different to the eastern seaboard. The NT Legal Aid Commission and NAAJA do outstanding work and their finances need to be understood.

Since becoming Attorney-General, I have met with the NT Legal Aid Commission. They also raised the matter of bush courts and the unique set of constraints on funding that they experience with that national partnership agreement. We also met with NAAJA regarding the challenges they are experiencing. The work is ongoing. As a bush member, I understand the sheer importance. How we can support the NT Legal Aid Commission and NAAJA to fulfil the role in the bush courts is front of my mind.

Mr EDGINGTON: An extra \$1.7m was provided to Legal Aid. Has there been any additional money provided this year to women's legal aid services that represent victims?

Mr PAECH: Women's legal services receive funding through the NLAP:

- the Top End Women's Legal Service receives \$312,000
- the Central Australian Women's Legal Service receives funding of \$444,000 for domestic violence legal services from the Territory, and Commonwealth funding of \$1.487m—that is the NLAP baseline generalist and baseline family law, family violence and domestic violence, and health justice partnership
- the Katherine Women's Information and Legal Service—KWILS—receives Commonwealth funding of \$256,000.

This funding has enabled the department to establish a grants administration team that manages the NLAP funding. The NLAP was amended during the financial year, which provided an additional \$3.54m to the Territory. At the time of preparing this brief these funds have yet to be fully allocated but I will work through a breakdown:

- domestic violence units and health justice partnerships is \$436,000
- increased legal assistance for vulnerable women is \$1.051m
- supporting people with mental health conditions with access in the justice system is \$862,000
- frontline support to address workplace sexual harassment is \$667,000—that has been paid
- supporting increased child sexual abuse prosecutions is \$109,000
- the justice policy partnership is \$89,000
- coronial inquiries, expense and complex cases is \$326,000.

I had the opportunity to meet with the Central Australia Women's Legal Service in Alice Springs and Tennant Creek—a similar response to the one I provided the Member for Mulka. They spoke about the funding

complexities. I have given them a commitment to raise it at a federal level across relevant portfolios and work with them. Every organisation that protects vulnerable Territorians is one I will stand up with and lobby for additional funding, whether that is through the Commonwealth or third-party investment.

Mrs LAMBLEY: Were you or your department consulted on the former Chief Minister's review of the ICAC Act?

Mr PAECH: I have answered that question. Our input was limited; it was just the Department of Chief Minister and Cabinet.

Mrs LAMBLEY: In the public interests, would you tell Territorians what input and advice you or your department provided for the ICAC review?

Mr PAECH: At the time, I was not the Attorney-General. My understanding is our involvement was limited and it was only the Department of the Chief Minister and Cabinet.

Ms LAKE: The department was consulted regarding the review. We provided a submission some time ago, largely legal technical issues with the legislation.

Mrs LAMBLEY: As the first law officer, do you support the decision not to release the terms of reference for the review or the submissions that informed the review of the act?

Mr PAECH: The legislation sits with the Chief Minister. I encourage you to direct that question to her.

Output 1.3 – Crime Victims Services Unit

Mr EDGINGTON: Can you tell us what the overall funding is for the Crime Victims Services Unit?

Mr PAECH: That is in Budget Paper No 3. It is \$7.951m.

Mr EDGINGTON: How does that compare to last year?

Mr PAECH: You will note in Budget Paper No 3 that the original budget was \$7.754m. It was later revised to \$8.572m.

Mr EDGINGTON: Based on the revised figure there has been a drop of just over half a million dollars?

Mr PAECH: I am happy to walk you through the budget variations for the output group.

Mr EDGINGTON: No, they are in black and white. What is the number of FTEs in the Crime Victims Services Unit? How many of those positions are vacant?

Mr PAECH: There are 16 positions and three positions are vacant.

Mr EDGINGTON: Have they been advertised?

Ms LAKE: We need to check on the reasons for the vacancies. We will come back to you.

Mr EDGINGTON: Do we have a solid number on recidivism over the past few years, in particular reoffending rates of non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal offenders?

Mr PAECH: I encourage you to ask that question in Output 1.4, Criminal Justice Research and Statistics.

Mr EDGINGTON: How many claims is the Crimes Victims Services Unit dealing with at the moment? Can give us a breakdown of how many claims there were over the reporting period and how many were resolved?

Mr PAECH: In relation to your previous question regarding the three positions, recruitment is under way for all three.

The Crime Victims Services Unit is established pursuant to section 5 of the *Victims of Crime Rights and Services Act 2006*. One of its main statutory roles is to administer the victims financial assistance scheme. The average time for a decision under the act is just over three years. As of 31 March 2022 there are 1,727

active applications. Not all of these are considered to be part of the backlog as applications always takes time to process. There are 452 outstanding applications that were lodged prior to 2018.

Mr EDGINGTON: What is the delay? The 452 prior to 2018 is an extraordinary number.

Mr PAECH: The reasons for the backlog include resourcing issues; difficulty getting records sometimes; the complexity of applications; the need to arrange independent medical assessments; and difficulties in maintaining contact with applicants. There has been a backlog for a few years and over successive governments. We have increased resources to help clear it. The Crime Victims Services Unit received ongoing funding of \$1.5m in the 2020–21 budget, which included \$1.25m for payments to victims and \$250,000 for additional staff.

The two additional short-term staff members commenced last September and October. All new ongoing positions were recently established and long-term recruitment is under way. The Crime Victims Service Unit has been working to improve its processes; restructured to increase efficiencies and improve overall outcomes for victims; and introduced a triage system to ensure the most vulnerable, including child sex abuse and elderly and domestic violence victims, are prioritised.

Work to review the *Victims of Crime Assistance Act 2006* has been conducted by the Department of the Attorney-General and Justice. In November 2018, a discussion paper was released on proposed reforms relating to victims of crime, including the reform of the act. Following consultation, a report was provided to then Attorney-General and Minister for Justice in August 2019. The review is complete.

I take this issue seriously and treat it as a priority. As the new Attorney-General, I am considering options for reform. The report on recommendations has not been publicly released but further work is under way on options to reduce the backlog and reform the financial assistance scheme. There is work to be done in this space. I am much looking forward to working with the agency to reduce those times.

Mr EDGINGTON: Why has that review not been released publicly?

Mr PAECH: I am still working my way through it, considering options and responses to the report.

Mr EDGINGTON: How many victims had input into the review?

Mr PAECH: We worked with a range of stakeholders who deal with victims every day.

Mr EDGINGTON: It is good to hear that stakeholders were involved. Can you tell me how many victims were involved?

Mr PAECH: I have answered the question. We engaged with stakeholders. The member may wish to ask that question that at later time.

Mr EDGINGTON: I gather the answer is probably 'no' by the sounds of it. Can you tell us how much the agency has paid out to victims in the reporting period?

Mr SMYTH: In the reporting period \$2,371,578 was paid out to victims. The to-date figure is \$3,782,078.

Mr EDGINGTON: How does that compare with last year?

Mr SMYTH: It is an increase.

Mr EDGINGTON: When did the review first start?

Mr PAECH: The discussion paper was released on the proposed work in November 2018.

Mr EDGINGTON: You have the report. I do not know how long it will take for you to look at the document but we are approaching three-and-a-half years or potentially four years before we see the outcome of the review.

Mr PAECH: I take this issue seriously. As the Northern Territory's Attorney-General and Minister for Justice I want to be completely across all aspects of the report. I need to be satisfied with the report and the options for victims in the Northern Territory, putting victims first and responding to them appropriately. I will work through the review, discuss it and then make steps when I am clear on what options are available.

Mr EDGINGTON: Why is this government making it so hard for victims? There has been a review going for three-and-a-half-years and there are 452 claims still outstanding from before 2018. Why is it so hard for victims to navigate their way through this system?

Mr PAECH: I dispute your comments. We are not making it harder. We are doing the work to reform this space to make it easier for victims. The work we are discussing now is of a serious nature. We need to look at it. Additional staff have been brought in to help process claims and work through the backlog. We will look at alternative options presented to us to streamline the process to process for the backlog.

There are a number of reasons why there is a backlog, including resourcing issues, which we have worked through; difficulty getting records; the complexity of applications; the need to arrange independent medical assessments—the current provisions require that—and the difficulty, in some instances, of maintaining contact with applicants. I am reviewing the work and look at the options before me.

Mr EDGINGTON: I am glad to hear you will be doing that. Looking at the current situation, based on the revised budget figure from last year, funding has dropped by half a million and you have three vacant positions, a number of outstanding claims and a review that has been going for three-and-a-half years. It is simply not good enough.

Can you release a copy of the review paper so that we can look at it? Will you release the paper so that not only the opposition but victims who are exposed to this system can provide input regarding this review?

Mr PAECH: There are no reductions in resourcing in this budget. The variations are in the budget papers.

I am yet have a comprehensive look at the review report and options. One of the challenges, as I have already highlighted, is working through the backlog. That is presented for a number of complex reasons. I have asked the agencies to look at that work and how we can streamline the backlog.

Mr EDGINGTON: Once you have had a chance to look at the review document, will you release it for public feedback?

Mr PAECH: I have answered that question.

Answer to Question on Notice No 6.7

Mr PAECH: I have a response to question 6.7. Has the Attorney-General's department received a copy of the ICAC review report? No, we were consulted and provided submissions but we have not received a final report.

Mr EDGINGTON: What is the primary source of revenue for the Crime Victims Services Unit?

Mr SMYTH: The payments to victims come from three primary sources. One is the victims levy, which is imposed by the courts on various offences. During the reporting period, that was \$2.512m. Another source of the fund is debt recovery actions under the *Victims of Crime Assistance Act*, which for the reporting period was \$117,017. There is also operational budget provided by the department for the unit. Primarily, the fund comprises the victims levy and debt recovery amounts recovered from offenders.

Mr EDGINGTON: What does the debt recovery involve? Can you tell me a bit more about that?

Mr SMYTH: When victims are paid out, the offender is generally known. Recovery actions can be taken in court to recover the amount that was paid to the victim, from that offender. The money recovered from the offenders is then paid back into the fund.

Mr EDGINGTON: How does that \$117,000 recovered compare to previous years?

Mr PAECH: It is slightly higher. In previous years it has been about \$110,000.

Mr EDGINGTON: The government has only recovered sums ranging from \$110,000 to \$117,000 from offenders over the last couple of years?

Mr PAECH: That is correct. It is about understanding the circumstances. When it is required, in most cases payment plans have to be enacted for people to pay either through making contributions because they are on social security or other avenues. The recovery of the funds is always discussed over the period of time and how much they will be required to pay.

Mr EDGINGTON: Is it standard practice to commence recovery with every offender?

Mr PAECH: Yes.

Mr EDGINGTON: Are you able to break down the number of applications by victims—I think you said it was 1,727 during the reporting period—by region?

Mr PAECH: I do not have that information to hand. I will take that on notice.

Question on Notice No 6.8

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

Mr EDGINGTON: In regard to the 1,727 victims of crime applications, can you please break that down by region across the Northern Territory?

Mr DEPUTY CHAIR: Minister, do you accept the question?

Mr PAECH: Yes.

Mr DEPUTY CHAIR: The question asked by the Member for Barkly has been allocated number 6.8.

Mr EDGINGTON: Is there any limit or maximum number of claims that a victim can make under the Victims of Crime NT program? Per incident or number of incidents. Is there a limit on the number of claims that a victim of any crime, various crimes or additional crimes can make?

Mr PAECH: There is no limit, it is per offence.

Mr EDGINGTON: Can a victim make a claim even if those offences arise from the same set of circumstance?

Mr PAECH: If it is charged as a number of offences, there is no limit. It is per offence.

Mr YAN: I know of an instance in Central Australia where a victim made three claims in a 12-month period and was advised that he/she could not make any more claims after further offences on their property. You are saying that is not the case?

Mr PAECH: That would be a matter for Victims of Crime NT, not the Crime Victims Services Unit. This is for serious violent offences. The victims of crime avenue is administered in another area.

Mr DEPUTY CHAIR: We will have a 10-minute break.

The committee suspended.

Answer to Question on Notice No 6.2

Mr PAECH: No settlements or judgements have been paid by SFNT during the current reporting period.

Mr PAECH: The Member for Namatjira asked a question regarding the victims of crime. The other funding is provided by the Northern Territory Government to Victims of Crime NT. It may have an internal cap on the number of times an individual can seek compensation.

Output 1.4 – Criminal Justice Research and Statistics

Mr EDGINGTON: Were there any changes in the way offence statistics were collected, analysed or presented in the past year?

Mr PAECH: No.

Mr EDGINGTON: Last year, I touched on the presentation of statistics available through the Northern Territory Police, Fire and Emergency Services site. They come out on the third Friday of every month. I asked if we could see a 10-year flow by financial year or calendar year of what the statistics were so that we could start measuring them over a five or 10-year period rather than going straight to the statistics on the third week of every month and everybody speaking about that particular release. Is there a way of presenting those statistics?

Mr PAECH: Quite comprehensive work would be required.

Ms WHYTE: The open data site has monthly data on the crime statistics going back to 2008. That is not formatted for a quick look at the statistics; however, it is our way in which people can get up-to-date data and a long history of it. At this stage, we do not have immediate plans to do more work with it.

Mr EDGINGTON: Why not?

Mr PAECH: The information is available through the portal, dating back to 2008.

Mr EDGINGTON: Rather than organisations or individuals having to work their way through all that data and information, would you consider presenting that data in a chart over a 10-year period so the average person can look at the movement in crime statistics over a one, two, five or 10-year period?

Mr PAECH: The information is available on the portal, which allows individuals, organisations and stakeholders to source the data they are after and gather it. There are no plans to compile that.

Mr EDGINGTON: There are no plans to make it easier for someone to access that information?

Mr PAECH: The data is easily accessible. It is on the portal going back to 2008 ...

Mr EDGINGTON: Thank you, minister.

Mr PAECH: ... which is comprehensive.

Mr CHAIR: Member for Barkly, when the minister is answering a question, allow him the call please.

Mr EDGINGTON: Do we have a solid number on recidivism over the past few years, in particular reoffending rates for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal offenders?

Ms WHYTE: The total recidivism rate for the current year of sentenced prisoners returning to prison with a sanction was 58.9%, which compares with 60.8% last year. This year is the first time the report on government services has provided the recidivism rate by Aboriginal status. For this year it was 61.8% for Aboriginal people and 35.8% for non-Aboriginal people.

Mrs LAMBLEY: Do you have the stats for last year?

Ms WHYTE: I would need to take that on notice. This is the first year we have published that.

Mr YOUNG: Are you able to explain the work of the Criminal Justice Research and Statistics Unit and the services it provides across government in data collection and analysis?

Ms WHYTE: The Criminal Justice Research and Statistics Unit is a shared service between this department; the Department of Territory Families, Housing and Communities; and the Northern Territory Police, Fire and Emergency Services. We also provide support to the Department of Health and Licensing NT with statistics related to alcohol in the justice system. Our unit provides statistics and research to build an evidence base for the development, monitoring and evaluation of criminal justice policy and operations. This includes analysis of data from across the criminal justice system, including alcohol-related harms, to develop information that would not be available if each agency was limited to its own data.

Mr PAECH: The Criminal Justice Research and Statistics Unit does an amazing job. Those partnerships are incredible and helpful. It is important to acknowledge that it is an inter-agency team that works to make comprehensive data and information is available.

Mrs LAMBLEY: I asked someone yesterday about release of the crime stats and they referred it to you. Every third Friday of the month at 10.30 am the public gets access to the monthly crime statistics. Why did Channel 9 have access to that data the night before? They ran a story on it. What is happening? Why are media apparently getting access to it before everyone else?

Mr PAECH: I am not aware of that. Information is shared with the minister's office and the Northern Territory Police.

Mrs LAMBLEY: The Police minister and Police Commissioner said yesterday that they did not know anything about it and that it was under your purvey as the Attorney-General, because you had control over the release of the statistics each month at 10.30 am on the third Friday. It does not seem fair that some people get the stats before others—clearly, Channel 9 had them last Thursday night, almost 24 hours before the rest of us. You cannot explain that?

Mr PAECH: I am not aware of them having that information or of anyone in the department providing it ahead of its release. The only people they are authorised to provide it to is the minister's office and the Northern Territory Police, Fire and Emergency Services.

Mrs LAMBLEY: Do you think there is a leak?

Mr PAECH: If you are indicating that the information was there on Thursday, I could not advise how.

Mrs LAMBLEY: Does that concern you? It is not a deal-breaking issue, but it is not fair for some people to have access before others. Would you investigate that matter?

Mr PAECH: I will endeavour to ask questions about it.

Mrs LAMBLEY: It has happened before, in the month before or the month before that. It is not the first time that I was aware media outlets had the information before the public had access to it. Would you take it on notice that you will endeavour to investigate why that happened?

Mr PAECH: I have indicated that I am happy to ask questions. I think that is sufficient. It is only provided to my office, as the minister, and to the Northern Territory Police ahead of that date. I will raise it with my Chief Executive, to remind everybody that is not the process.

Mrs LAMBLEY: If that is the case, it is a serious leak in your office.

Mr PAECH: That is the allegation you are making.

Mrs LAMBLEY: It is a fact. They have the information.

Mr PAECH: As I have indicated, I am happy to raise it.

Mr EDGINGTON: Can you provide the reoffending statistics for the past five years, broken down by category, such as Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal?

Mr PAECH: Given that is particular groups, we are happy to take that on notice.

Question on Notice No 6.9

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

Mr EDGINGTON: Can you provide the reoffending statistics for the past five years, broken down by category, such as non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal?

Mr CHAIR: Minister, do you accept the question?

Mr PAECH: Yes.

Mr CHAIR: The question asked by the Member for Barkly has been allocated number 6.9.

Output 1.5 – Aboriginal Justice Unit

Mr EDGINGTON: As the Aboriginal Justice Agreement gets into full swing, what are the top three programs we can look forward to being rolled out in the next year?

Mr PAECH: That is a superb question because there is so much happening. To pick the top three is a difficult task. There is:

- alternatives to custody and looking at options to expand it, particularly for our female population in the correctional environment and to the extent where we could look at closing down the female wings of our correctional facilities as a priority
- Aboriginal law and justice groups across the Northern Territory, which remain a key priority for us—there is a whole body of reform on pieces of legislation that are to be reviewed; they remain the priority
- for me, it is important that under programs there are options and alternatives, so that therapeutic programs are made available to people to see reductions in recidivism and men's behavioural changes
- bringing forward the Groote Eylandt archipelago alternative to custody site.

Ms Little has been much working across the Territory on other facilities we could look at for alternatives to custody for men, to increase those programs.

Mr EDGINGTON: I am interested to hear more about the law and justice groups. That was your priority under the Aboriginal Affairs strategy in 2019, over three years ago. Can you tell us where things are up to with the establishment?

Mr PAECH: The Aboriginal law and justice groups and community courts are front and centre. As the Northern Territory's Attorney General and a proud Aboriginal person, I recognise this work is incredibly important to address the large number of First Nations people who are overrepresented in the criminal justice system.

The law and justice groups provide a mechanism for Aboriginal people to assert self-determination and provide critical input into decision-making policies, programs, reforms and decisions, including the legislation that directly or indirectly impacts their ability to retain safer communities.

Law and justice groups are assisting across many arenas where there are impacts on justice outcomes. That is not limited to areas such as child protection, housing and education, it is a lot more. Since the removal of local community councils, the ability for a fully inclusive process by government that listens and responds to the concerns of Aboriginal people and their contract service providers has been limited. In some instances, it has been absent.

The law and justice groups enable Aboriginal people to feel and be led in a respected way, and heard on a number of issues that directly impact them. There are two law and justice groups. The first is Groote Eylandt or the Groote Archipelago, which is Groote Eylandt and Bickerton. The second is Kintore, which was launched on 19 October by then Attorney-General and Minister for Justice, Selena Uibo.

The Kintore local justice group is progressing with the Aboriginal Justice Unit, which is continuing to travel to Kintore undertake training, development, a local action plan and establishing appropriate employment and governance structures, which have been finalised. Ten community members have been nominated to be a part of the local justice group.

With COVID-19 there were restrictions on the local law and justice groups being able to meet but conversations have continued via other means of face-to-face interaction.

There is an application for a law and justice group in Maningrida and background checks have been undertaken for interested community members. The Aboriginal Justice Unit is travelling to Maningrida to progress the group, with the assistance of the Department of the Chief Minister and Cabinet.

There is strong interest in a number of communities—Haasts Bluff, Katherine, Amoonguna and Yirrkala—with planned visits to each of these areas in the near future.

The Groote Eylandt community justice group is aligned to the local decision-making agreement, funded by the Anindilyakwa Land Council and established and managed by contract with NAAJA in collaboration with the Aboriginal Justice Unit.

Law and justice groups align with the Everyone Together Aboriginal Affairs Strategy and local decision-making for community. These are important and critical aspects to the Aboriginal Justice Agreement.

Ms LIDDLE: The law and justice groups will continue to be an important path for Aboriginal people to have a platform to acknowledge and reduce crime, and create a safer space for Aboriginal people. Many communities have interest in this deliverable, but not all are ready and able to move forward. When we assess applications for law and justice groups the members undertake a criminal history check and we look at capacity for the unit to deliver training needed to bring the law and justice group into a space where it can operate well.

While there are 10 community members in Kintore that number may grow as the result of a decision or impact on the community raised by government or any other policy reform, because it is not a static group. The membership of the law and justice groups may change. For example, communities have identified the issue of food insecurity. When the power goes down there is an agreed response from the community as to what happens next. There are plans in place to work with communities and Aboriginal and government agencies when people cannot access fuel or food from the store, including tobacco. We recognise there may be a need for health clinics to step in and offer nicotine patches for people to ensure that community remains stable and there is no fighting. Each community may have a different list of priorities, depending on capacity and needs.

Mr EDGINGTON: How many staff do you have to establish the law and justice groups?

Ms LIDDLE: I am pleased to say that from the two full-time employees and two casuals we had previously we now have six full-time employees.

Mr PAECH: We increased from two to six people as of 31 March 2022. Those staff will complement the work.

Ms LIDDLE: We have several casuals. Four of those are of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent.

Mr EDGINGTON: Are you anticipating any further increases to that staffing complement?

Ms LIDDLE: We do not deem it necessary at this time, given the work plan and the deliverables allocated in the budget. We are coping well with the current number of employees to deliver on that service.

Mr EDGINGTON: The Everyone Together Aboriginal Affairs Strategy 2019–2029 had law and justice groups as a priority. That is more than three years ago, and two have been established. You have spoken about some of the issues and applications. Is there a target number to establish over the next 12 months?

Ms LIDDLE: The justice agreement does not identify targets. The reality is that law and justice groups take a long time to be put in place. We are receiving applications from communities. Ensuring that communities are not set up to fail is a responsibility of the unit, to make sure they are supported and that a due process assessment is done on applications to identify which ones we are able to support, given budget allocations and more. I expect that once we deliver on the two law and justice groups, Groote Eylandt and Kintore will receive community courts. There will be a flood of applications wanting law and justice groups. We will revisit those as the need arises.

Mr EDGINGTON: It is great to hear those two are moving ahead. We touched on the fact that some communities might not be ready to move forward with law and justice groups, regarding capacity and capability. What work is being done to build up that capacity and capability? Is that a community development role being undertaken by your department?

Ms LIDDLE: The Aboriginal Justice Agreement is a strategy to create safer communities. The community development space sits under the Commonwealth's responsibilities. Where training is required and identified in the law and justice groups, we support it for whatever priorities communities identified. The training component is not the responsibility of the justice agreement; however, linkages to Commonwealth programs

and more—CDP, any other services providers in that system—are important for us to deliver, including the community courts and their servicing models.

Mr EDGINGTON: Have you had early discussions with the new federal government about working together and driving this forward?

Mr PAECH: There is a high level of interest to explore the Aboriginal Justice Agreement on a Commonwealth level. It is important to acknowledge that the Department of the Chief Minister and Cabinet, through local government and regional development, looks at community development and capacity building opportunities. Minister Uibo is looking at developing capacity and opportunities through Aboriginal Affairs and the local decision-making frameworks, to make sure we are backing people in remote communities in taking back elements of decision-making and community control. Ms Liddle, through the Aboriginal Justice Agreement, works with multiple agencies to make sure that where there are synergies we are working together for the best outcome for remote Aboriginal Territorians.

Mr EDGINGTON: It is pleasing to hear there is interest from the federal government, but is there a commitment to deliver funding in this space?

Mr PAECH: There was a recent successful change of the Commonwealth Government. We flagged conversations to have with the new Commonwealth Government about providing it a comprehensive overview of what the Aboriginal Justice Agreement is, what it has achieved and what it will continue to achieve regarding its vision and deliverables. There is strong appetite to look at it further. As the unit works on the program growing we will work with the Commonwealth on support and commitments we see fit to request.

Mr YOUNG: What has been achieved since the launch of the Aboriginal Justice Agreement,?

Mr PAECH: To date a significant, comprehensive and thoughtful amount of work has been undertaken by the Aboriginal Justice Unit, which has been working to deliver the first AJA 12-month action plan for 2021-22. It has shifted from development to implementation, which included the staffing.

The AJA governance committee has held six meetings held to date, with six of working groups established. The Alice Springs Alternative to Custody facility, maintaining close to full capacity operations, had 16 successful completions. Only two of those 16 have reoffended, which is a testament to the work of the program. That rate of recidivism is low. It is a great facility. I had the opportunity to attend a site inspection.

The Member for Araluen has also attended the alternative to custody facility for the female population in Alice Springs. It is a wonderful facility; we looking at extending it, where practical to do so. The Groote Eylandt alternative to custody facility gained full approval from traditional owners, with preliminary works commenced and tenders released for construction. Katherine alternative to custody options are being explored, with reports provided to me.

We have been meeting with the judiciary and other key stakeholders to develop community courts, which you and the Member for Mulka are interested in. A community court working group was established with draft models, legislative frameworks, Aboriginal experience reports and procedural maps drawn up. There is:

- potential site identification for a non-custodial domestic family violence facility in Alice Springs, awaiting condition reports
- a grant process under way to pilot a new programs for prisoners on short sentences
- a tender awarded to review the *Bail Act*, *Sentencing Act*, *Juries Act* and *Parole Act* in accordance with the AJA—I am excited to look at what contemporisation needs to be incorporated in that legislation
- the Aboriginal Justice Unit, collaborating with Community Corrections, courts and Fines Recovery, to remodel fine payment schemes
- prisoner programs being reviewed by an external contractor
- a law and justice group progressing in Kintore
- a steering committee established to oversee the Groote Archipelago law and justice group, and alternative to custody

- law and justice group applications received from Katherine and Maningrida; and expressions of interest received for Haasts Bluff—or as it is commonly referred to in the southern region, Ikuntji—Amoonguna and Yirrkala
- six more Aboriginal Justices of the Peace and 13 more Commissioners for Oaths since the beginning of the Aboriginal Justice Agreement, and expressions of interest from six Aboriginal people in Ngukurr.

A key thing we need to progress in the Aboriginal Justice Agreement is more First Nations people across the Territory taking on the roles of Justices of the Peace and Commissioners of Oaths. I am not just talking about the bitumen up and down the highway. We want Justices of the Peace in places like Kintore, Yuendumu, Borroloola, Wadeye, Palumpa and across to outstations in the electorate of Mulka. Making sure that First Nations people across the Northern Territory have access to these services is important. It removes a potential obstruction because of the location of our remote brothers and sisters.

The Aboriginal Justice Unit is working comprehensively to make sure we expand the number of First Nations Justices of the Peace and Commissioners of Oaths across the Territory so that people can go to persons identified in their community rather than having to travel to a larger town where, in most cases, they end up in the front reception of the court house to have matters signed by a JP or a Commissioner of Oaths.

I continue:

- an agency review is under way; the DIPL review is being commenced by an external contractor. The review was to look across all agencies, starting with DIPL, regarding practices and dismantling any processes that are discriminatory against First Nations people.
- the complaints systems is being mapped
- an interview was conducted with the Anti-Discrimination Commissioner
- there were interviews with and booklets from the Ombudsman, Information Commissioner, health commissioner and Children's Commissioner
- a cost-benefit analysis is under way by external contractors regarding establishing justice reinvestment working groups
- a communications strategy and overview was approved by the minister
- an updated strategy and the next AJA 12-month action plan is being drafted
- the establishment of the Aboriginal Justice Unit—we have increased that unit from two to six.

As the workload grows and as we work through with the community, if the need grows it can be revisited in future budget processes regarding allocation and staffing ratio.

As an Aboriginal person and the Territory's Attorney-General, I am proud of the work that has been done to date with the Aboriginal Justice Agreement, it is onward and upward from here. It is a key foundation to restoring local decision-making and self-determination, and empowering First Nations people. Work is also being undertaken on First Nations Territorians understanding their rights and ways of accessing the justice system, and navigating and removing any obstacles that stand in the way of them accessing a fair and equitable justice system.

Mr EDGINGTON: How many individual communities have signed up to the Aboriginal Justice Agreement?

Mr PAECH: There is interest from communities across the Territory; 91 people have become signatories to the AJA. Ms Little will be able to talk about the consultations in the initial plan. We are working through it with the minister responsible for the local decision-making agreements. A large number of LDMs, which are government policies, explore justice components or access to justice and decision-making, which impacts on them. It is safe to say that everywhere we go as the Aboriginal Justice Agreement work proceeds there is growing interest, particularly in the review work on the *Parole Act*, *Bail Act Sentencing Act* and *Juries Act* given what has been occurring in the environment outside of parliament. There has been monumental interest in people being given the opportunity, through a number of stakeholders and organisations, to provide input.

Mr EDGINGTON: I am after the number of communities that have signed up to it.

Ms LIDDLE: It is not recorded as such because it is an individual obligation—people are signing up to meet the terms and commitments.

I can give an update of the number of Aboriginal people who have gone through alternative to custody. Nineteen Aboriginal women have entered and exited the six months rehabilitation program; only two have reoffended in that time frame.

Mr GUYULA: The Aboriginal Justice Unit has a budget of \$6.197m. This is the entire allocation of funding for delivery of the Aboriginal Justice Agreement and resourcing of the unit. Could you provide an outline of what this funding will be used for, including how many FTE staff are employed in what positions, and what programs will be established?

Mr PAECH: There is base funding for the Aboriginal Justice Unit of \$1.15m; \$250,000 of new funding to establish community courts; new funding of \$300,000 to establish law and justice groups; and \$2.7m of new funding to establish alternatives to custody in Alice Springs and Groote Eylandt.

Additional funding of \$2m has been welcomed by the Paul Ramsay Foundation, which does an incredible job working in the justice space with First Nations people. The ALC has provided \$12m towards alternatives to custody, looking at a targeted facility across the archipelago on Groote Eylandt.

Regarding overall funding, this budget caters for where we are at currently, in terms of required delivery and capacity. Each budget cycle will review it. With projected growth we will consider budget pressures. This is seed funding to plant the basis on which the Aboriginal Justice Agreement can grow and flourish.

We are proud of this program and thankful for the bipartisan approach from the Members of the Northern Territory Legislative Assembly. We are where we are because of what we have done. Based on the rate of incarceration of First Nations people in the Territory and their overrepresentation in the criminal justice system, it has not worked over successive years and governments. This is an opportunity to press the reset button and provide an alternative model that will work and empower people. We are seeing positive results from the early stages of Alternative to Custody in Alice Springs.

Mr GUYULA: The budget states there is approximately \$3m for establishing Aboriginal law and order groups, community courts and alternatives to custody. What will this small amount of money achieve? What are the expected outcomes by the end of the next financial year?

Mr PAECH: The budget allocation is based on the work to date and where we are at with the establishment. As we begin to unpack it and as additional remote communities allow us to work with them on the opportunities for law and justice groups, we will look at how we prioritise it.

Our target is 20 law and justice groups over four years. We will work to that. I am conscious of the appetite in the community and that it needs to be an even spread across all regions of the Northern Territory—north, south, east, west, saltwater and desert country. Every community is important and we value their input.

As an Aboriginal person I am aware that we, as Aboriginal people, are not a homogenous group. The objectives and desires of each remote community within the Aboriginal Justice Agreement will fluctuate. Different components and incorporating the way in which people consider things will be important. As the groups grow, the budget appropriation will be in line to accommodate it.

Ms LIDDLE: You have explained it well. There will be delivery of 20 law and justice groups across the seven-year time frame of the justice agreement. We are concentrating on the first two. We have been restricted with COVID and the Chief Health Officer Directions with us not being essential workers. We are working closely with the communities, getting all the work prepared in readiness to go to Kintore to keep moving the law and justice group forward.

It is important for us that the law and justice groups understand the commitment to the Aboriginal Justice Agreement, and that there is leadership in the community that will support the values and vision of the agreement so that we do not set the communities and law and justice groups up to fail. We are fully supported in that. Any government contracts that align with the priorities of the law and justice groups will be fully integrated into the system to get the best outcome for communities.

Mr PAECH: The Aboriginal Justice Unit is developing the action plan for the next 12 months, based on the funding in this budget. It will help us inform further budget requirement. When we go through standard budget

processes—the plan is for 20 law and justice groups over the next seven years, making sure we have baseline funding to accommodate the growth. First Nations people in the communities, where identified, will have a level of autonomy and decision-making, which needs to be resourced appropriately.

Mr GUYULA: The 2022–23 budget saw an increase in funding for police in remote areas by \$10m, whereas there is little funding for community-led justice initiatives, such as elders as peacekeepers or *raypirri* camps on country for young people. Could you advise why elders like me and many others are being ignored on this issue? We have been calling out for years for resources to allow elders to be a part of dispute resolutions.

Mr PAECH: Resourcing for police is a matter for the Minister for Police, Fire and Emergency Services, Kate Worden. I suspect the money you are referring to was secured as part of the extension to the NTRAI. The change of Commonwealth Government will require us to negotiate beyond that extension, which will be crucial to negotiate an arrangement to service remote communities into the future.

I admire your lobbying and advocacy for peacekeepers in remote communities; there is a role for them. I will work on it with the Aboriginal Justice Unit and the reference group, because of the important role they play.

There is a matter we need to discuss further in detail: what a therapeutic response is, whether it is a program or the community, and understanding that our elders and peacekeepers already in remote communities provide a therapeutic response in calming and de-escalating situations. I am happy to arrange a meeting offline to talk about your ideas on peacekeepers in remote communities; it has a lot of merit.

As we renegotiate the Remote Aboriginal Investment for policing, school attendance and a number of other areas—it is an extension from legacies of the Northern Territory intervention, which I do not support. The NTRAI funding has been extended; we need to renegotiate it.

Ms LIDDLE: We are working collaboratively with other agencies outside of government to development the law and justice group. ALPA wants to establish law and justice groups in the region. We are waiting for the proposal, will put it through our governance committee for the AJA and will work out how best we can support it. Law and justice groups are being delivered by NAAJA in Groote Eylandt. The thought that ‘only government was able to deliver these law and justice groups’ is not part of our dialogue. We want to partner and broker with other parties that have expertise in this area, outside the AJU staff.

Mr GUYULA: What work is going into addressing the recommendations of the Northern Territory Law Reform Committee final report on Mandatory Sentencing and Community-Based Sentencing Options, and the Report on the Recognition of Local Aboriginal Laws in Sentencing and Bail? What resources have been allocated to ensure implementation of the expert legal advice in these reports? What outcomes will we see within the next financial year?

Mr PAECH: The Aboriginal Justice Agreement law reform review will take all those matters into account. It is important that we have done the legislative review contracts, which were awarded to local Aboriginal resources and development services, ARDS. This will involve review of the *Bail Act*, *Juries Act*, *Sentencing Act* and *Parole Act*. The Aboriginal Justice Agreement law reform review will take all that into account and help us have an informed, evidence-based approach to any law reform we need to undertake in those spaces.

Regarding mandatory sentencing, I am working through the report by the committee. That was the opportunity to explore the repeal of a number of mandatory sentences in lieu of then introducing therapeutic interventions and programs for people.

It is important to clarify that when we talk about law in an Aboriginal sense there is a misconception by many non-Aboriginal people of what it means. Our law system is complex but it has a role to play for First Nations people. Whether we choose to like it or not, that element always continues because our culture is alive and strong. Aboriginal culture is perceived by many as quite brutal in some aspects. For particular ceremonies and purposes there are elements we need to work through and understand. There is an educational element for non-Indigenous people on those aspects.

It is a complex matter to work through, but that is the glory of the Aboriginal law and justice groups. A cultural element for many First Nations people is the way in which we exchange, mediate or participate through kinship and cultural obligations. I am looking forward to working with you. As the Territory’s Attorney-General and as an Aboriginal person, I am interested in exploring it further.

Ms LIDDLE: Regarding community sentencing, the community courts are the perfect vehicle to carry people with cultural authority alongside judges to deliver sentences that take into account victims and witnesses of

crime. It will allow Aboriginal people to be held accountable for the crimes they have committed, and have consequences.

We consulted and have been speaking to the two communities—Kintore and Maningrida—about the law and justice groups regarding their ability to establish a community court. For example, sentencing options need to be relevant to the offender and take into account the victim's needs. The type of sentencing people have identified as possible, with the assistance of those who are assisting the judge with the community court sentencing, are matters such as the inability for the Aboriginal offender not to use a fire—particularly given the weather in Central Australia. This means that Aboriginal people cannot cook food; they are unable to sit around a campfire with relatives and have discussions with other family members; they cannot light cigarettes; and they cannot keep the kurdaitcha man away.

There are penalties that are relevant and meaningful to Aboriginal communities that sit outside the western system but will have an impact on the offending and look at what the victim requires in restitution. The type of sentencing that Aboriginal people have put on the table are: the inability to use a firearm; or the need to provide food, such as fish, for the person you have caused harm to.

The ability for community courts to take into account cultural authority and accountability for offences is important. We are looking at how Aboriginal people can pay off fines, because the system does not work. Those matters could be heard in a community court and have appropriate sentencing. That way the offender and the whole community are aware of that person's penalty and punishment, and they are held accountable by the community not just a courtroom in Alice Springs, Darwin, Tennant Creek or Katherine.

Mr PAECH: Community courts enable greater community involvement by Aboriginal people in the court processes and consultation with traditional owners and elders about sentencing options; that is important. While many of our First Nations brothers and sisters have been to a western university, we have been to university in our culture through ceremonies, songs and connections.

It is important when they are going through the justice system that, outside of a western system where you may end up in custody, there is a traditional component. We will continue to work through the Aboriginal Justice Agreement to grow traditional elements and sentencing options where applicable. We can continue to build on that program and make sure it is done with rigorous consultation.

Expert elder advice takes into account that Aboriginal people are not all the same. Different parts of the Territory have a different level of punishment and issues. One elder might say that someone is excluded from a particular ceremony because of what they have done; or they can participate, but only in certain elements. Those things need to be considered. It is ongoing work. I am acutely aware as an Aboriginal person that there is an opportunity to put more tradition into programs. Community courts are an opportunity to further grow and expand.

The Aboriginal Justice Agreement looks at sentencing options exploring restorative justice work as well. As Minister for Local Government I have started a conversation with regional councils on where someone is sentenced that they can do community service or alternative sentencing options on country, rather than being incarcerated in a concrete cell.

There is a lot of work to do but it is an opportunity to use the Aboriginal Justice Agreement as a vehicle for change and empowerment for First Nations people in the Territory.

Mr GUYULA: The last part of Ms Liddle's answer talks about the *Makarrata* system which, through restorative justice, people take part and recover. The *Makarrata* is the way we restore fairly and justly.

Mr PAECH: That is an important consideration moving forward. Individuals before the justice system are being penalised or doing time twice. They do the time in a white fella legal context and when they come out—our culture is strong and people have cultural obligations or repercussions. It is important to look at bringing the two together through the Aboriginal Justice Agreement so that people going through the system are acknowledged and we have not turned a blind eye. Whether something happens in a white fella or western legal system we know, as Aboriginal people, that a process will happen regardless of when that person is released from incarceration. The restorative justice piece will be highlighted through the review. We will work with stakeholders and the reference group to inform us where to go to from there. It is an exciting opportunity to change the landscape of the process of justice and how we remove obstructions.

Mrs LAMBLEY: The amount you allocated to implementing the Aboriginal Justice Agreement is just over \$6m in the upcoming financial year, which will not go far. What you are describing is great; I am excited by

it. Let us try anything new and different that can empower Aboriginal people and improve the lives of people across the Northern Territory. But it is clear to me that this will cost a huge amount of money and \$6m will not go a fraction of the way towards rolling out what you are doing. What is your plan for funding this in the future?

Mr PAECH: It is an important question. There is appropriation in this budget. As the Aboriginal Justice Unit undertakes work on the action plans we will work on the reviews, which will look at any possible legislative change or how we operationally do things different. It will be a process as we work through the budget cycles. I am acutely aware that there will be a financial growth requirement in this space.

We have been fortunate to have a range of stakeholders who, like you and I, want to see a change in this space and a decline in the rates of Aboriginal people in the justice system. To date we have had financial support from the Paul Ramsay Foundation, and the Anindilyakwa Land Council for alternatives to custody. There are third parties we will work with and, as the program informs us where investment and capital are required, there is an opportunity for us to look at third-party investment.

Through the normal budget processes we will have information and evidence to inform budget requests as the program grows. We are confident that with the allocation in this years' budget we can fulfil the objectives we set in this financial year. We will be preparing concurrently for the next round of budget required as the program grows.

Mrs LAMBLEY: I have had a question sent through to me about the Anindilyakwa Land Council and the Paul Ramsay Foundation providing a total of \$40m towards the implementation of the Aboriginal Justice Agreement. The questions were about the priority of the government. Is the future of the AJA dependent on funding from other sources, not just government funding? Is that what you are looking to in the future?

Mr PAECH: No. A number of third parties have been wonderful in providing support because they want to see a change in the processes that are taking place. The government is proud of the Aboriginal Justice Agreement and will always look at the funding and where it needs to be increased to deliver. We will revisit it through budget cycles.

There will be a moment in time when, as we begin to see a reduction in incarceration, there will be the opportunity for costs to be allocated or re-prioritised to areas such as the Aboriginal Justice Agreement. It is a live process we are working in. The Northern Territory Government is committed to the continuation and overall funding. As we work through it and the program grows we will assess the funding needs and demands.

Mrs LAMBLEY: The other thing raised by the Member for Mulka earlier today is that funding for bush court work has been cut or is insufficient. You are rolling out the AJA, which is a different set of justice mechanisms in the bush. If you cannot fund one, how will you fund the other? Is that a choice or can you do things concurrently? We do not have an endless bucket of money. The budget is already blown out by \$8.7bn this year. Where will you get this money from when you cannot even sustain the current court and legal system you have in place in the bush? How can you bring in this next layer—which I am not saying is any better or worse—of justice when you cannot afford the one you have in place? It does not seem to be realistic or tenable from a financial perspective.

Mr PAECH: I have answered the question on the bush courts, their ongoing need and advocacy and the work with the Commonwealth. This will save money in other areas of the budget as it will be successful and people will have less interactions with the justice system.

We are confident that, through the delivery of the Aboriginal Justice Agreements and suite of measures, there will be a cost savings in other areas. Like anything, this will be assessed on demand each budget cycle. The agency is comfortable with the budget allocation and will continue to revise it as needs grow. Based on projections, there will be cost savings in the judicial system from a range of measures such as alternative sentencing and repeal of aspects of mandatory sentencing provisions. With all of these matters and the reduction in incarcerations, there are cost savings per day. We are confident that this will see a reduction in overall expenditure over the long term.

Mrs LAMBLEY: When do you project that happening? When do you see the savings coming into play?

Mr PAECH: A cost-benefit analysis is being done across the AJA. That will show us the projections.

OUTPUT GROUP 2.0 – CORRECTIONAL SERVICES
Output 2.1 – Custodial Services

Mr EDGINGTON: What are the current prisoner numbers by site?

Commissioner VARLEY: As of this morning, the numbers totalled 1,939 persons in custody, which by site is 1,187 in Darwin; 638 in the Alice Springs Correctional Centre; 71 at the Barkly Work Camp; and 43 at the Datjala Work Camp.

Mr EDGINGTON: What is the operational capacity of each site?

Commissioner VARLEY: The operational capacity for Darwin Correctional Precinct is officially 1,174, although we have an additional 76 male beds in place for extra surge capacity, which takes it to 1,250. The Alice Springs operating capacity is 650; Barkly Work Camp is 74; and Datjala Work Camp is 50.

Mr EDGINGTON: You mentioned overflow of 76 at Darwin. Is there additional capacity in other areas like the Barkly, Alice Springs and Datjala in Nhulunbuy?

Commissioner VARLEY: No, at this point that is the capacity we are working to.

Mr EDGINGTON: How would you manage increase in offender numbers in custodial facilities if the overflow in Darwin was reached?

Mr PAECH: We can look at options for relocating offenders across facilities in the Northern Territory and additional infrastructure that could be brought in to accommodate that capacity.

Mr EDGINGTON: What are the current full-time equivalent numbers for each of the custodial facilities?

Mr PAECH: Staffing numbers for uniformed officers are: Alice Springs has 172; Darwin has 350; Datjala Work Camp has eight; and Barkly Work Camp has 13. That is a total of 543. For non-uniformed staff in Correctional Services in the administrative, professional and physical streams, by location the numbers are:

- Alice Springs is 59
- Alyangula is 2
- Darwin is 148
- Jabiru is 2
- Katherine is 16
- Milikapiti—or Snake Bay—is 1
- Nhulunbuy is 7
- Tennant Creek is 11
- Wadeye—or Port Keats—is 2
- Timber Creek is 0.8, it is not a full-time position.

That is a total of 278 non-uniformed employees.

Mr YAN: Those numbers also include Community Corrections. Would you be able to give the numbers for custodial operations for the four custodial facilities?

Mr PAECH: The breakdown for custodial operations is 193 in Alice Springs, 417 in Darwin, 11 in Nhulunbuy and 16 in Tennant Creek.

Mr YAN: You may have misunderstood. You gave the numbers for uniformed staff at the four facilities. When I asked about non-uniformed staff you gave numbers that included Community Corrections. I am after the numbers for the non-uniformed staff for the four custodial facilities.

Mr PAECH: The numbers we provided are an amalgamation of Community Corrections and the correctional facilities. I am happy to take that on notice, if you require a breakdown of the non-custodial staff within the correctional environments.

Mr YAN: Yes, please.

Question on Notice No 6.10

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

Mr YAN: Would you be able to provide the breakdown of non-custodial staff—or non-uniformed staff—for the four custodial facilities of ASCC, DCC, the Barkly Work Camp and the Datjala Work Camp?

Mr CHAIR: Minister, do you accept the question?

Mr PAECH: Yes, I do.

Mr CHAIR: The question asked by the Member for Namatjira has been allocated number 6.10.

Mr YAN: You mentioned the custodial numbers for ASCC, DCC and the two work camps. What are the approved staffing model requirements for ASCC and DCC, noting there are 172 custodial in ASCC and 350 custodial at DCC?

Commissioner VARLEY: The Datjala Work Camp has eight and the Barkly Work Camp has 13. Alice Springs and Darwin become more complex. There is a staffing agreement model in place for Alice Springs. It works on a number of staff per day per shift at the facility at a capacity of 600. It is an agreement for 38 staff on day shift and 11 on night shift. There are increments up per every 10 prisoners to 650.

At Darwin we do not have a finalised staffing agreement in place with employees; we are working on that. We operate to a roster model. There are 350-odd uniformed prison officers at the location as at the last period. We roster them accordingly, plus additional staff as required depending on prisoner numbers.

Mr YAN: You are staffing to a model on a daily basis on the rostered positions, but that roster requires a staffing model to manage it, with an FTE total. Do you have the uniformed FTE staff total for the Alice Springs Correctional Centre?

Mr PAECH: That is an operational matter. I am sure you know the answer, as a former Corrections staff member.

Commissioner VARLEY: We are operating where we can with staff as required for each shift. The rosters are built around the staff who are needed to manage the capacity we have. The general manager and his team work carefully on that every day. We are currently at 172-odd uniformed officers. We manually adjust the rosters as needed to manage the staffing and prisoner capacity. The capacity of the prison changes and the staffing requirements change, for example, on week days. We run less staff on the weekends than we do on days during the week. We have other commitments, including hospital escorts, court escorts and other things. It is difficult for me to give you a precise and defined staffing model because the general managers at both sites manage within a cohort and demand.

Mr YAN: Off the top of my head, as the previous general manager of ASCC, the staffing model requires between 198 and 204 uniformed staff to maintain the roster. If you are saying 172 staff that puts them between 28 and 32 uniformed officers short to manage the staffing model. What recruitment action do you have under way for the correctional centres?

Mr PAECH: I was fortunate this week to attend the Darwin Correctional Centre for the induction of the latest trainee officers commencing their formal training in Alice Springs and Darwin. We have moved to a model where the recruitment round is open all the time, acknowledging there are challenges in attracting staff. During a recent visits to Darwin Correctional Centre and Alice Springs, one of the issues was the COVID pandemic. A number of correctional officers decided to go back to their jurisdiction of origin.

There has been a decrease in the staffing numbers, but we are running regular recruitment drives through targeted campaigns. Traditionally it has been opening up rounds; we are now moving to a model where it is open for individuals to apply at any time. One is operational now with training finishing in September. Our next intake will commence in October.

We are looking at how to bolster numbers and run a targeted campaign to increase numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander considering a career in Corrections. It will be across the country to attract people from interstate jurisdictions. We are also looking into how we can target our local Alice Springs community to encourage people to consider a career in Corrections, in custodial and non-custodial employment opportunities.

I have heard loud and clear from the trainers in Corrections and those in recruitment about keeping the round open to attract people and looking at how we streamline the processes from when someone applies to when they are ready to start their training.

Commissioner VARLEY: Year to date, we have recruited an additional 55 custodial Corrections officers. In Alice Springs a few weeks ago nine officers graduated and we commenced another class of 16 yesterday. There were 24 early graduates and six additional experienced Corrections officers in the year for the Darwin Correctional Centre—they are officers we recruit from interstate who have previous experience. We are working hard to go out to market to advertise and campaign for new recruits. I anticipate we will do much more as the year progresses.

Mr PAECH: I am sure you are aware, from our time at the Alice Springs Correctional Centre, that I am passionate about looking at prison industry positions across the Territory and how we can target employment in those areas, given that we need a level of experience and expertise. It is a challenge given the trials the Territory is experiencing with builders, steel fabrication and so forth. I have asked the commissioner to look at working with the community to understand that there is a variety of roles and responsibilities in Corrections that could fit many people, who may not be aware of it.

Mr YAN: How many recruits do you have in courses in Alice Springs and Darwin?

Mr PAECH: I attended the induction yesterday. There are eight under way in Darwin and eight in Alice Springs. We brought it forward because those who had applied had been successful. Open recruitment campaigns have commenced to bolster the numbers so that the intake in August will be greater than 20. That is our intention for both locations.

Mr YAN: A total of 16 across jurisdictions will not plug the gaps, considering your attrition rates.

Mr PAECH: I am aware of that. I was mindful that the eight in Alice Springs and eight in Darwin had been successful through the recruitment process, deemed suitable and well-placed to take on a career in Corrections. I did not want them to wait for an extended period of time, when they might look at gaining alternative employment options.

Whilst we need a number of minimum participants in the training, we also do not want to get to a point with the rolling intake where we people gain outside employment because of the wait time. We have an open recruitment. We can tell people when they go through the process, training and physical tests that if they are successful they have time to be accepted into the October round, cease other employment options and prepare. It is giving people certainty.

Mrs LAMBLEY: I visited the prison a few days after you became minister. Thank you for allowing me to do that, it took time to set up because of COVID and various other things going on. I have been visiting the Alice Springs Correctional Centre since about 2007. I was an official visitor for a while and, since my time as a local member of parliament, I have visited intermittently. I went as part of the Public Accounts Committee in 2016.

It had been a while. I was shocked at the low level of activity in the prison. The last time I visited the industries were booming; people were baking, making things and sewing; and it was a manufacturing hub. To go there the other day and see pretty much nothing happening was disappointing.

Times have been tough and COVID has given everyone a blow to activity. You have described a concerning problem with staffing, which came through loud and clear in my visit to the prison. The staff were tactful but I later found out that there is a shortage of about 50 staff.

What the heck has this government been doing in this space for the last five or six years since I was last there? I was told that they are let out of their cells and they clean up. Everything is pristine, clean, neat and tidy but, apart from that, there is not a lot going on. Why is this government not continuing to invest in proper rehabilitation for these prisoners? It is all in line with everything else you say you are doing regarding Aboriginal justice and empowering people. Most people there are Aboriginal. It is a depleted, inactive space.

Five or 10 years ago it was the opposite under the CLP; it was buzzing with activity. Now there is nothing happening and you are not even baking bread anymore. The whole facility is sitting in mothballs. I was shocked and deeply disappointed that a facility, in my town of Alice Springs, has been left to disintegrate to the bare minimum.

Mr PAECH: I have had the opportunity to attend the Alice Springs Correctional Centre and there was a lot of activity at the prison industries. I met a number of inmates and correctional staff in the steel work, arts and laundry. I do acknowledge that over the current short term period—I cannot speak for previous times—there has been a number of restrictions due to health and advice from the medical teams.

I chatted with staff about what additional resources may be required to increase prison industry services, as activities undertaken at the Alice Springs Correctional Centre are aimed at successfully reintegrating prisoners back into society. A range of programs are in place to look at health and hygiene development for prisoners; education and skills development targeted at reducing recidivism, include treatment intervention using impacts that crime has had on victims; and the community work program that supports local elderly or disabled communities and not-for-profit, government and supporting organisations. This program is aimed at repatriation, developing prisoners' work ethic and assisting with reintegration pre and post release.

Approximately 280 prisoners are employed internally to provide maintenance and support to the prison.

Prisoners can be employed externally on voluntary activities or through paid employment programs, at which stage they are charged for accommodation, transport and providing a levy to victims of crime.

The Alice Springs Community Correctional centre industries, which employ a number of prisoners, provides services to other government departments such as number plate printing for Motor Vehicle Registry, laundry services for the NT Police and meals for the Youth Detention Centre. They also sell goods to the public through the Pioneer Women's Hall of Fame markets and other avenues.

Through the Aboriginal Justice Agreement, procurement is under way for programs aimed at men's behavioural change. We will work through that process in the correctional centres across the Northern Territory.

One of the challenges for prison industries is that they are not allowed to compete with commercial practices in local communities. There has been dispute over the years regarding the bakery element. When I was in the Alice Springs and Darwin correctional centres I asked about what resourcing we would need to increase the capacity for inmates to participate.

Educational services continue to be delivered at both correctional centres, for the male and female populations.

Mrs LAMBLEY: With all due respect, I do not think you have the perspective of what it used to be like. For someone who has been around that prison for a long time it is staggering to see it now—I was even there when it opened.

With such a serious shortage of staff you must be paying an absolute motser out in overtime. Can you give me figures for how much overtime was paid in this reporting period compared to the last financial year?

Mr PAECH: That relates to an operational matter with rostering and overtime.

Commissioner VARLEY: I can give you a figure as of the end of May rather than the last reporting period. At the end of May the figure for overtime expenditure across NTCS was \$13,701,773.

Mrs LAMBLEY: What was the total overtime in the 2020–21 financial year?

Commissioner VARLEY: It was \$13,533,000.

Mrs LAMBLEY: To the end of May is 11 months?

Commissioner VARLEY: Correct.

Mrs LAMBLEY: The previous figure was for 12 months. It is sustaining at a high level.

Commissioner VARLEY: It is sustaining at a consistent level; it is a high figure. We will be working to reduce overtime as we continue to recruit more staff.

Mr EDINGTON: What is the attrition rate in custodial services?

Commissioner VARLEY: To provide some perspective, the five-year average attrition rate for NTCS was 8%. Our whole of NTCS figure for this financial year to the period 30 March 2022 for custodial was 10%.

Mr EDINGTON: That is a 2% increase on the five-year average. What are the reasons for that increase?

Commissioner VARLEY: The five-year average is what I look at over time. There are variations across years that contribute to ups and downs in each year. Our current rate of custodial separation is 10%. That is not a substantial outlier from where we are over normal periods of time.

Mr EDINGTON: There are still three months to go in this reporting period. With 10% already, there is potential for that to grow above that average?

Mr PAECH: There is the potential but it is important to highlight that we are doing a deep dive to understand the reasons why people choose to leave, through exit interviews or, for people who are not comfortable doing that, providing a questionnaire to respond. That will enable us to look at those practices so we can see a reduction. We are taking note of the landscape we are in, the challenges and the opportunities for people to be closer to family. That deep dive will help inform our recruitment and retention practices.

Mr EDINGTON: What are some of the reasons that were identified in the nine months?

Mr PAECH: That work is still being undertaken. Anecdotally, to date, people have made the decision to go south for personal reasons.

Mr EDINGTON: Earlier you said 543 FTEs for custodial services. What is the number of positions filled? How many vacancies are there?

Mr PAECH: That is operational on a daily basis.

Commissioner VARLEY: It is difficult to answer the question because the workforce ebbs and flows. With an organisation of 800-plus people and 540 of those in custodial, at any one time there is any number of vacancies across my enterprise, which we are working to manage. I focus on how many staff I have available to fill roster and shifts at each centre on the day—the answer to that is 543 for custodial.

We are working to recruit more. We have recruited 55 new officers this year and will continue to recruit more in the second half of the year. I cannot define a number of vacancies because they move around and I roster to what I need on the day in the centres. That is how the model works.

Mr EDINGTON: There are 543 FTEs for custodial services and 278 for non-custodial services. When you say that staff move around, do they move around between non-custodial services and custodial services?

Commissioner VARLEY: Yes, staff can move between different elements of the organisation. Likewise, we have staff moving in and out of roles on temporary relief basis and backfilling roles when people are absent on leave or when there are higher duties to perform. It is not unusual for those roles to be in different teams and elements of the structure. My executive and general managers and I focus on the numbers of staff we need to recruit to sustain our operating model. As required, we will backfill shifts on overtime and others on loan arrangements by moving staff around inside the model. It is difficult for me to give you a number for how many vacancies there are because it changes so often.

Mr PAECH: Traditionally civilian staff, unless they have taken leave from being a correctional officer and then can go back, do not tend to go that way. A correctional officer may seek a development opportunity for a period of time and take on a civilian role, whether that is in community corrections, sentence management or those types of roles. Unless someone who is fulfilling a civilian role has had the comprehensive training with NT Correctional Services, they cannot fulfil the role of a correctional officer.

Mr EDGINGTON: Perhaps I will ask that in a different way. There are 543 custodial employees and 278 non-custodial. I have quickly done the maths and I think it is 821. How many vacancies are there?

Mr PAECH: In a custodial corrections environment? The numbers for non-uniformed staff also included Community Corrections, which would not be based in a correctional centre.

Mr EDGINGTON: How many vacancies need to be filled or recruited to?

Mrs LAMBLEY: In addition to that, how do you know how many positions you need to recruit to if you do not know how many vacancies there are? Every other government department in the Northern Territory knows this. I am mystified.

Mr PAECH: Based on the rostering system, that number fluctuates because people take leave, as they are entitled to, which in turn fluctuates the number of vacancies or rosters that need to be filled.

Commissioner VARLEY: It is difficult for me to give you a precise answer for a number of factors and because of fluctuations we work with in the roster model for custodial. For example, last financial year for the same period we had 546 FTE; this year we had 543. We manage ons and offs through attrition and recruitment, as we explained. We have vacancies at any point in time, for example, in our non-uniformed employees in Community Corrections and our specialist services. I am working to define more clearly how many more staff I can recruit to supplement the roster later this year. I do not want to say that there are a certain number of vacancies because I work on how many staff I can recruit and roster on duty any one point in time.

Mr EDGINGTON: How many extra staff do you need to fill your roster today? You told us there are 543 FTEs.

Commissioner VARLEY: I know how many staff I have available on the roster today. We would backfill a certain number of positions depending on absences, leave, sick leave et cetera. That incurs work to manage the rosters and vacancies on any one shift. It is also dependent on the number of prisoners that each general manager is required to manage, and all the different factors of those operations that I outlined earlier. I can only answer with how many staff we are employing as of today. We work to a fluid model of the roster, and the operational demands that we need to meet each day.

Mr EDGINGTON: How many people are you employing as of today?

Commissioner VARLEY: I do not have an accurate figure for you of the total number of people employed, I can only answer in terms of FTE.

Mr EDGINGTON: I am quite baffled.

Mrs LAMBLEY: I am baffled, too, commissioner. I have never heard of this. How are you different from a hospital or a police service? You are working with shifts and fixed numbers of prisoners.

Mr EDGINGTON: I have tried every possible way to ask this question and still cannot get an answer.

Mr PAECH: The commissioner has provided that the number of uniformed prison officers by FTE and location as of 31 March was 543. That is broken up across the four locations.

Mrs LAMBLEY: We have been asking about vacancies. How many positions are you recruiting? To me it sounds like you are avoiding answering this question.

Mr PAECH: That is not true. As the commissioner has highlighted, this is a fluid process and it depends on the number of leave applications and required escorts. I give you assurance that the hard-working correctional staff monitor and make sure the roster is done accordingly with all safety practices.

Mrs LAMBLEY: By not answering the question, it is implying that the figures are so terrible that you do not want to tell us.

Mr EDGINGTON: How many vacancies are advertised as of today?

Mr PAECH: We have a rolling recruitment in operation. We encourage all people considering a career in the Northern Territory Correctional Services to apply. A round for Correctional Services officers is scheduled to be completed in September, which is for 16. The next round starts in October.

Mr EDGINGTON: How many vacancies are you recruiting to?

Mr PAECH: Each round is 20 or 30 correctional positions in both locations, which we have the capacity to do. We will work through it with targeted employment.

Mrs LAMBLEY: This is budget estimates. We are asking questions about how you are spending public money and what is going on in a government department, the public service. You are not answering basic questions. This is incredible. You are deliberately avoiding answering questions on staffing, which is unprecedented.

Mr PAECH: I acknowledge that you are not happy with my answer but I am responding. Rostering for Northern Territory Correctional Services is a complex process that changes day to day, dependent on the activity in and out of the correctional centre; the environment; and scheduled appointments, whether it is consideration of officers that need to attend court appearances or medical appointments. We could not give you an average number because, as the commissioner highlighted, it fluctuates every day dependent on the activity in and out of the correctional environment. We have targeted employment campaigns aimed at increasing correctional officer numbers.

Mrs LAMBLEY: You are running an organisation with over 800 FTEs and you have no idea how many vacancies there are, how many positions you are recruiting to and how many people as of today are at work. You are not providing us information because you simply do not know. That is no way to run a business. If you were in private enterprise you would be going broke quickly.

Mr PAECH: Thank you for your commentary on the matter. We have provided the FTE numbers. We have comprehensive plans in place for targeted recruitment. The commissioner has identified the work being undertaken in Correctional Services with the executive team to make sure there is an appropriate staffing ratio on a daily basis to service the needs—whether they are complex needs—in the correctional centres.

The more recruitment we do, the more we bolster our correctional numbers. We can take those into consideration. It is important that leave entitlements, sick leave—all those things fluctuate on a daily basis. The commissioner made it clear that we are on a journey to increase our recruitment drive to raise numbers participating in the Correctional Services environment.

Mr EDGINGTON: Can you tell us what the budget allocation is for personnel at the Darwin Correctional Centre for the 2022–23 year? If you have information about Alice Springs as well, I will take it.

Mr PAECH: The overall budget allocation to Correctional Services is \$209.368m. I am happy to take the breakdown on notice.

Question on Notice No 6.11

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

Mr EDGINGTON: What is the budget for personnel at the Darwin Correctional Centre and the Alice Springs Correctional Centre for 2022–23?

Mr CHAIR: Minister, do you accept the question?

Mr PAECH: Yes.

Mr CHAIR: The question asked by the Member for Barkly has been allocated number 6.11.

Mr EDGINGTON: Given the difficulty in finding out the staffing levels across Corrections, is the staffing at the Darwin and Alice Springs Correctional Centres sufficient to ensure the safety of corrections officers?

Mr PAECH: The answer is yes.

Mr EDGINGTON: Are they safe when they go to work?

Mr PAECH: It is a priority of this government that every worker who goes to work is safe.

Mr EDGINGTON: Then why do we not know how many vacancies there are?

Mr PAECH: Mr Chair, we have answered that question.

Mr EDGINGTON: Do we know how many vacancies there are in Community Corrections?

Mr PAECH: I am happy to take that on notice.

Question on Notice No 6.12

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

Mr EDGINGTON: How many vacancies are there in Community Corrections as we stand today?

Mr CHAIR: Minister, do you accept the question?

Mr PAECH: Yes.

Mr CHAIR: The question asked by the Member for Barkly has been allocated number 6.12.

Mr EDGINGTON: We have spoken about the number of prisoners at the Barkly Work Camp. How many of those prisoners are in skills training or paid employment?

Commissioner VARLEY: I have figures for end of 31 March. This can vary day to day. As you would appreciate, the work camps are designed primarily to ensure that we have people in skills training or work. Those figures are ordinarily high. The total number of prisoners engaged in work programs or program development at 31 March at the Barkly Work Camp was 62, which was 98%.

Mr EDGINGTON: Can you provide details of whether private security is being used at Darwin Correctional Centre?

Mr PAECH: No, there is not.

Output 2.2 – Community Corrections

Mr EDGINGTON: In 2020–21, it was estimated that only 72% of community orders were successfully completed. What is the current estimate for 2021–22?

Commissioner VARLEY: The KPI target for community work orders successfully completed was 72% for this year. As of three quarters of the way through this year to date, we are well above that. Quarter one was 78%, quarter two was 81% and quarter three was 78%.

Mr EDGINGTON: Can you give us an example of what ‘successfully completed’ means?

Commissioner VARLEY: It means that they have completed the terms and conditions of their orders without fault or breach. Our community and probation parole officers monitor those closely. If you are asking me for the specific counting rules and the definitions, I would take that question on notice.

Question on Notice No 6.13

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

Mr EDGINGTON: When it comes to completion of community orders, what does ‘successfully completed’ mean in this context?

Mr CHAIR: Minister, do you accept the question?

Mr PAECH: Yes.

Mr CHAIR: The question asked by the Member for Barkly has been allocated number 6.13.

Mr CHAIR: We will break for lunch. Thank you everyone for the morning session. We will come back at 1 pm.

The committee suspended.

Mr CHAIR: Welcome back. It is 1 pm at Estimates hearings 2022. We are in Output 2.2, Community Corrections.

Mr EDGINGTON: Can you please explain how electronic monitoring is conducted in the Territory? Is it still contracted out? How are alerts for those who violate the terms of their parole or bail sent to police? If you have the number of people on electronic monitoring we are interested.

Mr PAECH: As of 31 March, 208 people were subjected to electronic monitoring and community-based supervision orders, and 100 were on bail orders. The number of people on bail subject to electronic monitoring has grown from 80 or 30% on 30 July 2021.

In October 2020 the Northern Territory government finalised the procurement process for a multi-agency contract for the provision of electronic monitoring services for five years. Buddi Ltd was successful. Agencies worked to ensure a smooth transition of services before the expiry of the previous contract on 31 December 2020. Buddi is responsible for the delivery of electronic monitoring services to the Northern Territory Government and the operation of the monitoring centre. It works with standard operating procedures to ensure the appropriate escalation of breaches to the supervising agency.

There are three agencies using electronic monitoring: Northern Territory Correctional Services for monitoring of offenders on community-based orders, and prisoners residing in work camps in Tennant Creek and Nhulunbuy; Territory Families, Housing and Communities for monitoring of young people subject to community-based orders, including supported bail; and the Northern Territory Police for monitoring of people subject to police bail, including young people.

Mr EDGINGTON: What is the overall cost to the Territory for the five-year contract? What is the contract? Is it a fixed cost or is it per prisoner? How does the contract work?

Mr PAECH: That is an operational matter. We have two years but if you would like the five years I am happy to take it on notice.

Commissioner VARLEY: There are a couple of variables to the contract but it is mostly fixed. For the service we purchase there are variables with consumable equipment and devices that need to be replenished from time to time. The expenditure for 2021–22 was estimated to be \$4.736m and for next year we are budgeting \$4.89m.

Mr EDGINGTON: Is there a forecast beyond those two years?

Mr PAECH: That is part of the five-year agreement. If you would like the costings on that, I am happy to take that on notice.

Mr EDGINGTON: Yes, I will take that on notice.

Question on Notice No 6.14

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

Mr EDGINGTON: What is the overall cost to the Northern Territory Government for the five-year contract with Buddi Ltd for electronic monitoring?

Mr CHAIR: Minister, do you accept the question?

Mr PAECH: Yes.

Mr CHAIR: The question asked by the Member for Barkly has been allocated number 6.14.

Mr YOUNG: How are prisoners giving back to the community? What type of community work is available for prisoners to repair harm caused?

Mr PAECH: There is a range of options we can access for restorative justice. From a correctional perspective, people are able to participate in work camps in the Territory: the Barkly Work Camp in the Barkly; and the work camp in the Arnhem region in Nhulunbuy. There is the Sentenced to a Job program. Offenders are also able to be out on day release to participate in community service orders and programs.

Recently we finalised another MOU with the Alice Springs Town Council, rectifying a matter regarding public liability insurance. We have work camps back out servicing the community of Central Australia; that was a welcomed program. Where Correctional Services is able to mobilise, have inmates participate in day release programs and work with people across the Territory is important.

Since becoming the Attorney-General and Minister for Justice I am interested in how we broaden the scope so inmates can participate in restorative justice programs and deliver in the communities they come from or where there was an altercation. People can see the restorative practices and that they are helping their community. A unique experience and opportunity is before us. I am also the Minister for Local Government. I have extended the conversation with local governments, if they are interested, about what it would look like and how people can participate those programs.

Mrs LAMBLEY: The prisoner work gangs around Alice Springs were suspended for quite a while, from late last year through to recently. Can you explain what happened? It is a vital service in our community. I remember when it started. It has been operating for about 25 years, providing essential support and maintenance services to a number of community groups, including the council.

Mr PAECH: The program was restricted during COVID but there was also a matter we were working through with the Alice Springs Town Council regarding liability insurance. We have since worked through that and rectified it through the MOU. That can be up and running again.

Mrs LAMBLEY: Are we back to full capacity in servicing? That is what I am interested in.

Commissioner VARLEY: The Alice Springs Town Council and Correctional Services MOU was recently signed and I am pleased that we are back to work and helping the council with its priorities. As for the quantum of that work, I would be happy to take that question on notice, with regard to the number of hours and tasks undertaken in the last couple of weeks.

Mrs LAMBLEY: Could I get a briefing? It is important work.

Mr PAECH: Yes, of course. I am happy to organise a briefing.

Ms BOOTHBY: I was advised the same thing, that Corrections community works where prisoners perform lawn mowing and landscaping for senior Territorians ceased indefinitely late last year. Can I find out when that ceased in Palmerston? Will it recommence?

Mr PAECH: Given that is a particular occurrence, I am more than happy to take that on notice so that I can provide you with an accurate response.

Question on Notice No 6.15

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

Ms BOOTHBY: I was advised that Corrections community work, where prisoners perform lawn mowing and landscaping for senior Territorians in Palmerston, had ceased indefinitely. When did this cease and when will it recommence?

Mr CHAIR: Minister, do you accept the question?

Mr PAECH: Yes.

Mr CHAIR: The question asked by the Member for Brennan has been allocated number 6.15.

Mr YAN: We are on the Community Corrections output and the questions being responded to and your statement to the Member for Daly are about custodial work parties. There are Community Corrections work parties or reparation teams. How many Community Corrections reparation teams or work parties are in operation across the Territory?

Commissioner VARLEY: The Community Corrections work service program is an important one. We have agreements in place with 200 organisations across the NT to support offenders and fine defaulters to complete unpaid work in their local communities. For the period 1 July to 31 March, 249 individuals were on a community work order in various elements of their communities. Some would be in groups and others might perform their work individually. As to how those work areas operate, it comes down to local specifics. As of 31 March this year we had completed 13,267 hours of community service work.

Mr YAN: Do you have specific teams in various locations that take people out on community work orders?

Commissioner VARLEY: Our community probation and parole officers work closely with individuals in their local community. On occasions, we may support them in making their way to or accessing community service work activities. By and large, the organisations we work with facilitate and support individuals to complete the work.

Mr YAN: What is your budget expenditure for supervision of those community work orders?

Commissioner VARLEY: I would need to take that question on notice.

Question on Notice No 6.16

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

Mr YAN: For the supervision component of the community work orders, what is your annual budget for the reporting period?

Mr CHAIR: Minister, do you accept the question?

Mr PAECH: Yes, I do.

Mr CHAIR: The question asked by the Member for Namatjira has been allocated number 6.16.

Answer to Question on Notice No 6.13

Mr PAECH: As per the report on government services completion of community service orders is defined as the percentage of community correction orders completed during a year that were not breached for failure to meet the requirements or because further offences were committed. Order requirements may involve: restrictions on the offender's liberty, as with home detention; a requirement to undertake community work or other specified activities such as drug or alcohol programs; regularly attending a community correction centre as part of supervision requirements; or other conditions.

Mr YAN: How many orders are Community Corrections supervising across the Territory?

Mr PAECH: As of 31 March 2022 the offender numbers by office location were: Alice Springs, 224; Casuarina, 220; Groote Eylandt, 28; Katherine, 134; Nhulunbuy, 39; Palmerston, 213; Tennant Creek, 62; and Wadeye, 41. Is there a particular location you want to break down to probation, parole, community work order, bail et cetera?

Mr YAN: I am looking at the amount of orders being supervised against the work orders that we are doing. That is a large number of orders being supervised, the total would be about 980. How many parole officers

supervise across all your locations? What is the relationship between offenders being supervised and the number of people available to supervise them?

Commissioner VARLEY: The total number of Community Corrections officers as at 31 March was 139. In Alice Springs, 29.5; Alyangula, two; Darwin, 62; Jabiru, two; Katherine, 16.6; Snake Bay, one; Nhulunbuy, four; Palmerston, 10.6; Tennant Creek, 8.6; Timber Creek, 0.8; and Wadeye, 2.

Mr PAECH: The number you were after is 963.

Mr YAN: Do the 29.5 probation parole officers for Alice Springs include administrative officers or managers? Is that the total staff or just probation parole officers?

Commissioner VARLEY: That is the total number of Community Corrections officers in each location.

Mr YAN: It is a high caseload for that region. If you look at Nhulunbuy, with 40 supervision orders and four staff, that is 10 per person. The numbers have not changed much over the years; I am hoping they will in future, commissioner, as it will make your job easier. If you are trying to keep people out of custody, you will have to invest heavily in Community Corrections.

Mr EDGINGTON: With electronic monitoring, are alerts of breaches transmitted in real time to Corrections and police?

Commissioner VARLEY: NTCS recently trialled and implemented a more sustainable model of managing EM notifications. We have an after-hours rostered probation and parole officer on 24/7, enabling immediate notification to us and, when required, to the police.

Mr EDGINGTON: It does not go directly to the police? It is direct to Corrections and your requirement is to notify the police?

Commissioner VARLEY: There is a model for both. The police monitor and are able to access the data relating to their offenders. We work closely with the police to share information on individual offenders as required. If there was further information required from Buddi we are there to assist.

Output 2.3 – Parole Board

Mr EDGINGTON: Who are the members of the Parole Board? Are there any vacancies?

Mr PAECH: I am happy to take that on notice. The board is extensive; it is a long list. I am happy to provide a response in writing.

Mr EDGINGTON: We can take that on notice.

Question on Notice No 6.17

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

Mr EDGINGTON: Who are the members of the Parole Board? Are there any vacancies?

Mr CHAIR: Minister, do you accept the question?

Mr PAECH: Yes.

Mr CHAIR: The question asked by the Member for Barkly has been allocated number 6.17.

Mr EDGINGTON: Is the COMMIT program still operating?

Mr PAECH: The COMMIT program has not been cut. Grant-funded alcohol and other drug services by the COMMIT participants indicate their treatment needs and can be accessed through community-based services such as those funded through the Department of Health. The system is there and AOD services can be accessed through the Department of Health funding.

Mr EDGINGTON: How many parolees or prisoners are engaged in the program?

Mr PAECH: As at 31 March, for COMMIT sentencing there were 26 active, 89 completed, 11 removed and 52 revoked. That is a total of 178. COMMIT parole has 56 active, six pending, 53 completed and 94 revoked. That is a total of 209.

Mr YAN: How many offenders are you supervising on parole?

Mr PAECH: There are 137.

Mr YAN: What is the percentage of offenders released to parole who are completing their parole orders?

Mr PAECH: I do not have the percentage at hand, but I am happy to take that on notice.

Question on Notice No 6.18

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

Mr YAN: For offenders released to parole, what is the percentage who complete their terms of parole?

Mr CHAIR: Minister, do you accept the question?

Mr PAECH: Yes.

Mr CHAIR: The question asked by the Member for Namatjira has been allocated number 6.18.

Mr YAN: Are you seeing an increase or decline in offenders taking up the ability to take parole?

Mr PAECH: I am happy to take that on notice as well.

Question on Notice No 6.19

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

Mr YAN: Are you seeing an increase or decrease year by year in offenders taking up the opportunity for parole, from 2016?

Mr CHAIR: Minister, do you accept the question?

Mr PAECH: Yes, I do.

Mr CHAIR: The question asked by the Member for Namatjira has been allocated number 6.19.

Answer to Question on Notice No 6.17

Mr PAECH: You asked about the number of positions on the Parole Board. There are 18 positions. There are four positions vacant. One is a community victims' rep and the other are community rep positions, which I am hoping to have finalised next week. I have reviewed the recommendations.

Mr EDGINGTON: Do you know how long they have been vacant for?

Mr PAECH: How long each position has been vacant depends. I have made sure it will be secured shortly. If you are asking how long they remained vacant I would have to take that on notice.

Question on Notice No 6.20

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

Mr EDGINGTON: There are four vacancies on the Parole Board, one victims' rep and three community reps. How long has each of those positions been vacant for?

Mr CHAIR: Minister, do you accept the question?

Mr PAECH: Yes.

Mr CHAIR: The question asked by the Member for Barkly has been allocated number 6.20.

OUTPUT GROUP 3.0 – COURT AND TRIBUNAL SUPPORT SERVICES
Output 3.1 – Higher Courts
Output 3.2 – Lower Courts and Tribunals

No questions.

Output 3.3 – Fines Recovery Unit

Mr EDGINGTON: What is the aggregate amount of fines and penalties outstanding as of today? How does this compare to last year?

Mr PAECH: The total outstanding debt as of 31 March 2022 was \$112.8m. Last year it was \$111.6m.

OUTPUT GROUP 4.0 – DIRECTOR OF PUBLIC PROSECUTIONS
Output 4.1 – Director of Public Prosecutions

Mr EDGINGTON: What is the case load for the DPP and how does that compare to last year?

Mr BABB: The case load for last year was roughly 9,200 cases. The majority of those, 7,000, were in the Local Court. For this year the statistics are ongoing but we are tracking at similar levels.

Mr EDGINGTON: Do we have a number for how it is tracking to March this year?

Mr BABB: I will have to take that on notice.

Question on Notice No 6.21

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

Mr EDGINGTON: What is the case load for the DPP for this year as at 31 March 2022?

Mr CHAIR: Minister, do you accept the question?

Mr PAECH: Yes.

Mr CHAIR: The question asked by the Member for Barkly has been allocated number 6.21.

Mr EDGINGTON: What is the full-time equivalent staff for the DPP?

Mr PAECH: For the division it is 79.

Mr EDGINGTON: Are there any vacancies?

Mr BARB: There are seven vacancies; five of them are legal positions and two are administrative positions.

Mr EDGINGTON: It seems there was a reduction of funding for the DPP by about \$2m this year. Is that correct?

Mrs LAMBLEY: How does that affect your operation? All those cases and \$2m less?

Mr PAECH: There was a reduction resulting from funding carried forward from 2020–21 and 2021–22 for two well-known, public, expensive legal cases. They were before additional funding was provided.

Mr EDGINGTON: The revised budget for last year was \$15.4m and it is down to \$13.35m. How will that affect the operations of the DPP this year?

Mr PAECH: It is a result of one-off funding for those expensive cases. As other cases present we will work with Treasury.

Mr EDGINGTON: Did the DPP request an increase in funding for 2022–23?

Mr PAECH: Every agency goes in the budget cycle and puts forward considerations for resourcing requirements. As the Territory's newest Attorney General, I met with the DPP and continue to work with them to understand the cost challenges and resourcing issues they may be experiencing.

Mr EDGINGTON: That is good to hear, but did they request an increase in funding?

Mr PAECH: An additional \$1.047m was approved in May 2022 as part of the budget for this financial year and next financial year.

Mr EDGINGTON: It dropped \$2m but you have increased it by \$1.047m.

Mr PAECH: The budget in 2021–22 was \$12.74m, revised with the one-off funding; it was \$15.407m. In this budget there is \$13.356m.

Mrs LAMBLEY: It has been one year, this week, since the ICAC made a recommendation as a part of the Darwin Turf Club grandstand report. The former chairman, Mr Brett Dixon's actions may be referred to the Director of Public Prosecutions for the consideration of criminal charges and to the Commissioner of Police for consideration as a disqualified person, under section 40 of the *Associations Act 2003*. Has the DPP received any referral from the ICAC and, if so, has any action been taken?

Mr BABB: I am not aware of any referral in relation to that matter.

Mrs LAMBLEY: What is the staffing level in your office of DPP? How many vacancies are there?

Mr CHAIR: Seventy-nine FTEs and seven vacancies.

OUTPUT GROUP 5.0 – INDEPENDENT OFFICES

Mr EDGINGTON: In the interests of time, we will not ask any questions of the independent offices. I thank them and advise that their participation is recognised.

OUTPUT GROUP 6.0 – NT WORKSAFE **Output 6.1 – NT WorkSafe**

Mrs LAMBLEY: I want to ask about temporary buildings and their permits. There must be reasonable concerns for the structural integrity of any temporary building.

Mr PAECH: That matter would be for the Infrastructure portfolio.

Mrs LAMBLEY: Temporary buildings do not come under your remit, through WorkSafe?

Mr PAECH: Not the building permits but, Chris Wicks, Director Regulatory Reform at NT WorkSafe, would be able to talk about if they are notified of concerns on a building site. The permits are a matter for the Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Logistics.

Mrs LAMBLEY: Has WorkSafe taken any action to enforce building safety where there are temporary permits in place, in the reporting period?

Mr WICKS: No, we have not in the sense of strict action. We have had notifications of concern but we do not enforce building permits, as such. We are looking purely at work safety. We are aware and we have been taking activity but not action.

Mrs LAMBLEY: Has Worksafe been asked to investigate the non-compliance issues at TIO Stadium?

Mr WICKS: We have inquiries under way.

Mrs LAMBLEY: Can you elaborate on what the nature of those inquiries are?

Mr PAECH: The director has indicated there are inquiries under way; that is all that we are at liberty to say.

Mrs LAMBLEY: It is confidential?

Mr PAECH: Yes.

Mr EDGINGTON: Is NT WorkSafe is investigating any workplace incidents at BRADAAG in Tennant Creek that occurred after 2018?

Mr PAECH: It is an operational and investigative matter.

Mr WICKS: There is an inquiry under way for an issue raised with us regarding BRADAAG. I prefer not to elaborate on what that inquiry is and its stage.

Mr EDGINGTON: If it is not confidential, why can you not elaborate on that?

Mr PAECH: There is an inquiry in the area being undertaken by the appropriate resources of WorkSafe.

Mr EDGINGTON: It might be a preference not to elaborate but, if it is not confidential, could you please elaborate?

Mr PAECH: Given that potential sensitivities may arise, I do not want to put someone in a position of being uncomfortable proceeding with those inquiries. At this stage our response is that an inquiry is under way.

Mr EDGINGTON: Is it just the one incident under investigation?

Mr PAECH: There is an inquiry under way; that is the response.

Mr EDGINGTON: A single inquiry is under way?

Mr PAECH: An inquiry may raise a number of matters or be a single matter. It involves an inquiry by a person.

Mrs LAMBLEY: When a temporary permit expires, does WorkSafe routinely check the safety of the site?

Mr PAECH: Those permits are a matter for the Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Logistics.

Mrs LAMBLEY: I am questioning the role of WorkSafe in temporary permits.

Mr PAECH: Permits are issued by the Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Logistics. Where there are individuals working on-site, if a query is raised then NT WorkSafe would attend the site to check worker safety.

Mrs LAMBLEY: Only if there is an issues raised? It is not routine?

Mr PAECH: Initially, if a concern has been lodged by an individual, NT WorkSafe attend. Where there is capacity they would also do spot checks to see if all compliance measures were being carried out.

Mr WICKS: NT WorkSafe is called in when there are complaints or issues have been raised in regard to electrical or worker safety. Whether the appropriate permits is in place does not across our desks.

Mr TURNER: With the booming amount of work being generated in the Northern Territory, what work is NT WorkSafe proactively undertaking to improve worker safety?

Mr PAECH: WorkSafe responds to queries and concerns raised by members of the public or workers. In addition, it runs a variety of compliance checks across the Territory.

Mr WICKS: We do proactive work. I do not know if you are aware of our strategic plan? It directs our proactive work and identifies five priority industries and a number of priority mechanisms of injury. A beautiful example is electrical safety, which will come up soon in Central Australia. Another one is the unfortunate silicosis uptick; that was an active campaign we undertook. We also proactively revisit sites where we are aware there have been possible breaches of the legislation. You might call them further responses; we prefer to call them further inspections.

Mr TURNER: I have been impressed with the information on your website, it is fantastic.

Mr PAECH: The plans on there are comprehensive. We intend to continue campaigns as well. We are running an electrical safety campaign in Central Australia regarding compliance and so forth. The report is comprehensive and allows people to see where the priority areas are over the short and long term.

Mr TURNER: Your budget has remained roughly the same year-on-year. Will that enable you to keep up with the proposed growth of industry in the Territory, especially over the next 12 months and beyond?

Mr PAECH: There are budget variations. Some are in relation to regulating petroleum exploration production and reductions in campaigns as they finish. The agency is comfortable that the functions and requirements will be fulfilled. Like anything, if there are growing pressures or items identified over the forward period we will consider budget requests.

Mr TURNER: How many investigators does NT WorkSafe have?

Mr WICKS: There are 60 incidents under comprehensive investigation, plus a number more that are under a level of inquiry, which is a step below a comprehensive investigation. We have three investigators.

Mr TURNER: Are they all based in Darwin?

Mr WICKS: Yes.

Mr TURNER: How is the rest of your staff made up?

Mr PAECH: Are you asking how investigatory work happens in other places across the Territory?

Mr TURNER: I imagine three investigators trying to manage 60 investigations is somewhat complex.

Mr WICKS: It is complex. I am sure you are aware of the Lyons review, which made restructure recommendations. We are still undertaking that restructure process. We recently advertised for a permanent director of investigations; that space is fluid. We have a space for a few more investigators plus the base level of inquiry by our inspectors, who have been trained in basic investigation processes.

Mr TURNER: How many inspectors do you have?

Mr WICKS: We have 21 inspectors.

Mr PAECH: We are in the process of hiring a new executive director, which will provide WorkSafe the opportunity to renew its policies and practices under new leadership. I will be working with the department and the new executive director to ensure WorkSafe is achieving its desired outcomes, principally keeping workers safe. That includes the safety and wellbeing of police officers; I know you are interested in that area.

Mr TURNER: I have nothing but glowing praise for the recent engagement I had with your department. They have been fantastic. The only thing it brought to life for me systemically in looking through the objects of the act was making Territorians, especially Territory workers, more aware that you are there for them to go to and use. The material on your website is fantastic. From talking to your staff, they are exceptionally knowledgeable about what they do. From speaking to people—with my recent incident, which was well publicised—they did not know you were an option. It is about reach and engagement.

Thank you for everything you have done, Mr Wicks, and your team.

Mr PAECH: That is important. Mr Wicks and Peggy Trump, our acting executive director WorkSafe, are here. Thank you for providing that feedback. There is still a lot of work to do in this space but we are committed to implementing the recommendations from the Lyons review. Our priority is keeping Territory workers safe.

The role of Worksafe is keeping workers safe but it does not do audits on other agencies or departments, including provisions regarding mental health services.

OUTPUT GROUP 7.0 – CORPORATE AND SHARED SERVICES

Output 7.1 – Corporate and Governance

Output 7.2 – Shared Services Received

No questions.

Mr CHAIR: That concludes considerations of all Output Groups relating to the Department of the Attorney General and Justice. On behalf of the committee I thank you, minister, Ms Lake and your team, and everyone in AG who has done all the hard work over the last little while for your time and efforts.

Mr PAECH: Thank you Mr Chair and members of the Estimates Committee. I acknowledge all members within the Department of the Attorney General and Justice who made themselves available today and did comprehensive work in preparing estimates briefs.

Mr CHAIR: The committee will now move to consider the Outputs relating to the minister's other portfolios which are Racing, Gaming, Licensing, and Desert Knowledge Australia. We will take a short break as we change over.

The committee suspended.

RACING, GAMING AND LICENSING

DESERT KNOWLEDGE AUSTRALIA

DEPARTMENT OF INDUSTRY, TOURISM AND TRADE

Mr CHAIR: We shall recommence estimates 2022. We will look at Racing, Gaming and Licensing, and Desert Knowledge Australia. Minister Paech, I invite you to introduce the officials accompanying you and make an opening statement, should you wish to.

Mr PAECH: I advise of the presence today of the Chief Executive of the Department of Industry, Tourism and Trade, Mr Shaun Drabsch; Joanna Frankenfeld, Chief Financial Officer; and Catherine White, General Manager Business and Workforce.

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

No questions.

Mr CHAIR: Output Groups 8.0 and 9.0 are the responsibility of other ministers.

OUTPUT GROUP 10.0 – BUSINESS INNOVATION AND WORKFORCE

Mr CHAIR: Outputs 10.1 and 10.2 are the responsibility of other ministers.

Output 10.3 – Occupational Licensing and Associations

No questions.

Mr CHAIR: Output Group 11.0 is the responsibility of other ministers.

OUTPUT GROUP 12.0 – TOURISM, SERVICES AND HOSPITALITY

Mr CHAIR: Outputs 12.1, 12.2 and 12.3 are the responsibilities of other ministers.

Output 12.4 – Racing, Gaming and Liquor Licensing

Ms BOOTHBY: The racing industry has had cuts of \$11.6m from the revised budget. Why? What is being cut to the tune of \$11.6m?

Mr PAECH: The decrease of \$11.598m compared to the revised budget was a carry-over from 2021–22. That was alcohol policy, Community Benefit Fund levy, and liquor and tobacco compliance, which is Commonwealth funded.

Ms BOOTHBY: What is the reason for the variation from the revised budget?

Mr DRABSCH: There are adjustments that relate to external funding such as the Community Benefit Fund, which was carried over from 2020–21 to 2021–22. That was subsequently expended in the year just ending. There is an adjustment related to the NT Remote Aboriginal Investment Community Safety Implementation Plan that went into 2021–22. This year there are funds which were in the previous year's budget, which do not continue into this year, such as the community benefit levy; liquor and tobacco compliances, which is a Commonwealth-funded grant; and top-up funding for Thoroughbred Racing NT.

Ms BOOTHBY: Budget 2021–22 was \$33.5m, the revised budget was \$44m and Budget 2022–23 has \$32m—approximately \$11.5m. Regardless of the reason in variation from the 2021–22 budget to this revised budget, is it not a startling coincidence that it represents virtually the same amount of the new grandstand at the Darwin Turf Club?

Mr PAECH: There is no relation.

Ms BOOTHBY: Will you make the Darwin Turf Club repay the \$12m grant you gave them to build the grandstand?

Mr PAECH: I met with the Darwin Turf Club and Thoroughbred Racing Northern Territory. I am confident that the recommendations of the ICAC report have been or are being implemented. There is a funding agreement in this budget for Thoroughbred Racing NT. Discussions regarding the Darwin Turf Club \$12m grant are ongoing.

Ms BOOTHBY: Will you make them repay the \$12m under this budget?

Mr PAECH: The discussions about the Darwin Turf Club grandstand are ongoing.

Ms BOOTHBY: Under the ongoing discussions, what arrangements will be made?

Mr PAECH: I have responded. Discussions about the Darwin Turf Club \$12m grandstand are ongoing.

Ms BOOTHBY: Is the Darwin Turf Club onside with the discussions you are having with them?

Mr PAECH: I met with Darwin Turf Club, have been to the Turf Club and met with the members of the board and Thoroughbred Racing NT. Discussions about the grandstand and the grant are ongoing.

Ms BOOTHBY: Do you think that this sends a message of uncertainty to all grant recipients that the government can punish them for its mistakes and have conversations to try to recoup grant money?

Mr PAECH: The discussions about the Darwin Turf Club grandstand are ongoing. As the Minister for Racing, Gaming and Licensing I know firsthand how important the racing industry is to the Northern Territory and the economic opportunities the industry brings. Conversations about the \$12m grant are ongoing.

Ms BOOTHBY: When will you make decision about whether you will ask the Turf Club to repay the \$12m?

Mr PAECH: Those conversations are ongoing.

Ms BOOTHBY: You cannot tell us when those conversations will be finalised and a decision made?

Mr PAECH: I can tell you that those conversations are ongoing.

Ms BOOTHBY: Is there any cut to funding in this budget that directly relates to the Darwin Turf Club, Thoroughbred Racing or recouping of the \$12m?

Mr PAECH: No.

Ms BOOTHBY: How was the allocation of community grants determined? Who considers these and who signs off on the funding?

Mr PAECH: The Community Benefit Fund has a committee that comprises of eight non-government representatives from all regions across the Northern Territory. It is responsible for assessing applications and providing recommendations on funding for major grants, major community event grants and vehicle gifts, which is a consideration for NT Fleet vehicles as they finish their time.

The director of gaming control is responsible for providing recommendations on gambling research and minor grants. All applications are assessed against guidelines approved by the minister. The grant purposes are set out in the *Gaming Control Act 1993*. Organisations are sometimes slow to collect grants and this can result in them being paid in different years to when they were approved. A community group or organisation may be successful in a grant application but can seek extensions from the department to deliver and acquit it if they are held up through goods and services, issues on land tenure et cetera.

Ms BOOTHBY: You mentioned that the guidelines for the community grants are approved by the minister. Who is the person who signs off on the funding allocation?

Mr PAECH: When an individual grant is applied for it goes to the committee to make a recommendation. Sometimes they will not accept it if particular criteria has not been met in the application process; or the grant process will go through and people will be notified why the committee did not proceed or recommend that the grant be funded.

Ms BOOTHBY: Does the Minister for Racing, Gaming and Licensing sit on that committee?

Mr PAECH: No.

Ms BOOTHBY: What are the guidelines that create the situation where a minister would not be the one who signs off on a grant allocation?

Mr PAECH: The committee would make recommendations based on the criteria set out in the terms and conditions in the application. Those recommendations come through to a responsible minister, which is me as the Minister for Racing, Gaming and Licensing. I would have the end approval of the grants.

Ms BOOTHBY: A 62.53% increase in gross profit from gaming machines is significant. How does this flow on to the Community Benefit Fund? What work is being done to assist people with a gambling problem?

Mr PAECH: We do work in gambling and harm minimisation. There are codes of practice for gambling in the Territory. The Community Benefit Fund comes from gambling revenue. Within that, the breakdown is about minor, major, gifts, major community events and an opportunity for gambling research to be undertaken.

Ms BOOTHBY: Is gambling research being undertaken by the Community Benefit Fund?

Mr PAECH: At this stage there are no applications for research but I will confirm that. Further to that, gambling amelioration is \$2.4m. It is to assist people who require help in harm minimisation and overcoming gambling challenges.

Ms BOOTHBY: Is there any reason for the 60%-plus increase in gross profit from gaming machines, despite a decline in the number of gaming machines across the Territory?

Mr LOVETT: There was a spike over COVID with gambling turnovers; there has been a slight decrease at the back end of this calendar year. Primarily there was a spike in gaming machine turnover flowing through to the CBF as a result of lockdowns. This was a national trend where gambling turnover across all forms of betting increased substantially.

Ms BOOTHBY: Does the decline in the number of gaming machines across the Territory during the reporting period have something to do with particular venues closing down and therefore the gaming machines no longer being in use?

Mr PAECH: When a venue is closed the machines still remain licensed to it but the doors are closed. There will be a decrease in revenue. During COVID lockdowns and venues having to close or restrict with social distancing there was a decrease in revenue because of the number of machines not being utilised.

Ms BOOTHBY: I am not talking about the revenue. In the Licensing NT Annual Report 2021 on page 11 there is a decline in the number of gaming machines across the Territory. Is that due to businesses closing down in the reporting period and therefore not operating gaming machines operating anymore?

Mr PAECH: Yes, the number of gaming machines approved for use in hotels and clubs is 1,575 but 1,328 are in operation.

Ms BOOTHBY: Can you explain the decline?

Mr PAECH: It may be the fact that venues have closed or made decisions not to open an entire gaming room. It is dependent on the club or hotel's ability to operationalise—they might be experiencing staff shortages where they cannot have full gaming rooms open. It varies across the board.

Ms BOOTHBY: You have given me generic examples of why there could be less gaming machines in operation but the annual report talks about the number of gaming machines. Do you have a specific reason for that decline in the gaming machine numbers?

Mr LOVETT: The minister is right. There are a range of operational issues as to why individual pubs or clubs may not be operating their full complement of machines or, in some cases, have handed back machine licences—staffing, financial considerations, COVID lockdowns. There is not any one reason which encompasses the fluctuation. Equally, we could see a rise next year which would be for a variety of different reasons as well.

Ms BOOTHBY: The gaming machine number has declined to 1,328. How many had to hand back their licences for gaming machines?

Mr PAECH: There is approved use for 1,575 and 1,328 in operation. They are operational decisions for each licensed venue if they want to engage back to 1,575. They have not been revoked.

Mr LOVETT: No gaming machine licences were handed back in over the reporting period, which was remiss of me not to state before. There were 55 machines at the Darwin RSL, which burnt down in 2018. That would probably account for some of the difference between the operation and registrations.

Ms BOOTHBY: It seems like a long time ago.

Mr LOVETT: They are still on the books but not operational.

Ms BOOTHBY: Last year stakeholders were asked to participate in a review of the minimum floor price. When can we expect the results of that review to be made public?

Mr PAECH: I have carriage over the Licensing components. Minimum floor price would be a matter for the Chief Minister, who has jurisdiction of Alcohol Policy.

Ms BOOTHBY: You cannot comment under the liquor licensing portfolio about that public review?

Mr PAECH: Not in relation to volumetric tax. I have carriage over the licensing of venues.

Ms BOOTHBY: Since the institution of a floor price in the Territory, alcohol-related violence has not decreased—indeed, it has increased. What are the essential KPIs for the floor price and how are you measuring the success?

Mr PAECH: We have risk-based licensing, which we work with when a venue may need a higher licensing fee. Overall, the Chief Minister has carriage of Alcohol Policy.

Ms BOOTHBY: Under your portfolio of liquor licensing, have you had input into the review on the minimum floor price?

Mr PAECH: To date, in three weeks as minister for Licensing, I have not.

Ms BOOTHBY: What about your Licensing department? Has it worked with the Alcohol minister to provide input towards the review?

Mr PAECH: Yes, as an agency we have.

Ms BOOTHBY: Has the information Liquor Licensing put forward to the review been made public?

Mr PAECH: That is a matter for the review.

Ms BOOTHBY: What evidence from Licensing would show categorically that the floor price is a failed experiment?

Mr PAECH: That is a question for the Alcohol Policy minister. We have a range of risk-based licensing. My jurisdiction is purely compliance and the Licensing applications and processes.

Ms BOOTHBY: Can you broadly outline the complaints investigated against licensed premises? What types of complaints and actions were taken?

Mr TIMNEY: Over the reporting period the majority of complaints referred to the Liquor Commission were in relation to breaches of Banned Drinker Register requirements. The Liquor Commission, which is an independent statutory body and not part of my office is responsible for determining those matters and handing out penalties. It is fair to say that they have taken a particularly harsh approach with BDR breaches. Predominantly, a licensee that breaches the BDR on a number of occasions will receive a suspension of their takeaway liquor licence.

We do other activity. In previous years there would have been a number of complaints about intoxicated people in public or on licensed premises; that number seems to have fallen away. There are some, but it is a smaller number than we have experienced in the past.

Ms BOOTHBY: What evidence would you attribute to the number of intoxicated people at licensed venues decreasing?

Mr TIMNEY: The Liquor Commission deals with complaints appropriately and firmly. You would be a naive licensee to turn up before the Liquor Commission for a BDR breach and think that you will not cop a penalty, because you will.

It has been difficult times for licensees. They are aware of their obligations and responsibilities. My experience in this industry over a long time is that most licensees are responsible businesspeople and they behave appropriately. The measures in place, including the penalties they are likely to cop if they do breach, have just smartened up the industry to an extent.

Ms BOOTHBY: Do the measures in place for licensees and strict consequences act as a deterrent so that people do not continue to fly under the radar and do pull up poor behaviour?

Mr PAECH: That is correct, but we also have an active compliance process.

Mr EDGINGTON: The Liquor Commission handed down a decision in Tennant Creek last year in regard to ongoing restrictions. Part of the decision was that local people could buy a mixture of drinks, for example, two bottles of wine, one bottle of spirits or other options. Is it now possible for a resident to purchase a combination of drinks that add up to no more than that limit?

Mr TIMNEY: The lightest restrictions in Tennant Creek are either/or a slab of beer, a bottle of spirits or a couple of bottles of wine.

Mr EDGINGTON: Part of the Liquor Commission decision was that a combination of those drinks could be purchased. Has that been implemented?

Mr TIMNEY: That was what they did in Yarralin. It was a combination there, but my recollection was that Tennant Creek was either/or. It was an option for what you purchased.

Mr EDGINGTON: It was before the Liquor Commission decision. Has that changed or it remains?

Mr TIMNEY: It is my recollection that it has not.

Mr PAECH: We can take that on notice.

Question on Notice No 6.22

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

Mr EDGINGTON: The most recent Liquor Commission decision allowed for a combination of different drinks to be purchased, rather than two bottles of wine or bottle of spirits or beer. Can you please advise whether that decision by the Liquor Commission has been implemented?

Mr CHAIR: Minister, do you accept the question?

Mr PAECH: Yes.

Mr CHAIR: The question asked by the Member for Barkly has been allocated number 6.22.

Mr EDGINGTON: How many premises have been declared private restricted premises to date this year? Can you provide a breakdown of where those premises are, for example Darwin, Palmerston, Alice Springs, Katherine, Tennant Creek and other areas?

Mr PAECH: I am more than happy to take that one on notice to provide you with comprehensive data.

Question on Notice No 6.23

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

Mr EDGINGTON: How many premises have been declared private restricted premises to date this year? Can you please provide a breakdown of the number of premises by region, being Darwin, Palmerston, Alice Springs, Katherine, Tennant Creek and any other areas?

Mr CHAIR: Minister, do you accept the question?

Mr PAECH: Yes.

Mr CHAIR: The question asked by the Member for Barkly has been allocated number 6.23.

Ms BOOTHBY: What is the function of Desert Knowledge?

Mr PAECH: I am mindful that the Department of Industry, Tourism and Trade has jurisdiction, as an agency, over Desert Knowledge Australia. It is an independent, not-for-profit statutory corporation of the Northern Territory, established in 2003 by legislation. Its remit is to encourage learning, socioeconomic development research and environmental sustainability in Central Australia.

The work we are doing with Desert Knowledge Australia is to develop opportunities to build stronger, more connected desert and inland communities. Desert Knowledge Australia is located in Mparntwe, referred to as Alice Springs.

The new Chief Executive was appointed, Mr James Cocking—or referred to by many people in the community as Jimmy Cocking. He works with the board on a number of deliverables relating to inland sustainability.

Desert Knowledge Australia has the Alice Springs Future Grid Project, Intyalheme, and work in the energy space. It has delivered desert leadership programs and looked at a number of codes for life, which at the time was a men's behavioural change program. There are lots of opportunities for Desert Knowledge Australia to become the country's premier destination for inland sustainability.

Ms BOOTHBY: How much does the CEO of Desert Knowledge get paid?

Mr PAECH: I would have to take that on notice. From our recent advertisement it was about \$240,000.

Question on Notice No 6.24

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

Ms BOOTHBY: How much does the CEO of Desert Knowledge Australia get paid?

Mr CHAIR: Minister, do you accept the question?

Mr PAECH: Yes.

Mr CHAIR: The question asked by the Member for Brennan has been allocated number 6.24.

Mr EDGINGTON: What is the budget allocation for Desert Knowledge?

Mr PAECH: The Territory provides recurrent funding of \$560,000 annually to Desert Knowledge Australia. They have the opportunity to source other revenue opportunities.

Mr EDGINGTON: Is the \$560,000 via a grant program? Are there specific delivery requirements?

Mr PAECH: It is a statutory body; that is provided. There are reporting requirements in line with the remit of Desert Knowledge Australia. I met with the new CEO and they are working on a strategic plan, revising their core objectives.

Desert Knowledge Australia sits within the Desert People's Precinct, a co-location for the Batchelor Institute and CfAT.

The board of Desert Knowledge Australia reports to me quarterly. I meet with them regularly to discuss their strategic plan and where they are looking at going.

Mr DEPUTY CHAIR: That concludes consideration of Output Group 12.4. Output 12.5 and Output Group 13.0 are the responsibility of another minister.

Non-Output Specific Budget-Related Questions

No questions.

Mr PAECH: I thank the members from the Department of Industry, Tourism and Trade and the public servants who worked tirelessly to compile the information available for the Estimates Committee.

Mr DEPUTY CHAIR: On behalf of the committee, I thank the agency and officers who assisted the minister.

The committee suspended.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

DEPARTMENT OF THE CHIEF MINISTER AND CABINET

Mr DEPUTY CHAIR: Minister, I invite you to introduce the officials accompanying you.

Mr PAECH: I have Maree De Lacey, Executive Director Local Government in the Department of the Chief Minister and Cabinet; Bridgette Bellenger, General Manager Territory Regional Growth; Meeta Ramkumar, Senior Director Sustainability and Compliance; Ethan Redshaw; and Hugh King.

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

Mr EDGINGTON: There is a significant cut to the output of almost \$30m from last year's budget and over \$50m from last year's revised estimate. Can you be specific about what is being cut and how much of that is from Local Government?

Mr PAECH: That is for regional coordination of Local Government and Aboriginal Affairs as a whole. It includes a range of options, which have already been delivered. I am happy to go through them:

- Darwin City Deal national partnership funding for education and community precinct was \$27.3m
- Blue Mud Bay Implementation Action Plan was \$8m
- Jabiru social infrastructure fund was \$5m
- Jabiru and Kakadu futures was \$2.9m
- Barkly Regional Deal national partnership and NT Government funding profile was \$5.8m
- Commonwealth funding for legal interpreter services of \$1.2m.

Mr EDGINGTON: How much of that is specifically in relation to Local Government?

Mr PAECH: Looking at the comparison between 2021 and 2023, in 2021–22 it was a total of \$58.5m and in 2022–23 it is \$60.25m. That is a variance of \$2.2m. Movements in personnel and operational budgets between 2021–22 and 2022–23 are largely due to parameter adjustments and internal agency budget realignments. The increase in grants budget of \$2.58m includes additional funding of \$3m for a new ‘community place for people’ grant program, which commences in 2022–23 for three years.

Mr EDGINGTON: What is that grants program?

Mr PAECH: It is a great grant program. ‘Community places for people’ is a grant program offered to increase liveability in regional areas. Under the guidelines that could be making places more liveable with cooling incentives, shading and greening our communities.

Mr EDGINGTON: Given that the government has failed to spend \$2.95m in Tennant Creek, will any of that money be going there?

Mr PAECH: The opportunity is there. It has an application process. Councils can put in an application for funding under the grant program.

Mr EDGINGTON: During the year, which local government areas had compliance reviews conducted?

Ms RAMKUMAR: We did seven compliance reviews across the local government sector. They were not the normal routine compliance reviews, they were based on special-purpose compliance reviews. During the year we reviewed five councils.

Mr EDGINGTON: What does ‘special purpose review’ mean? Is there a reason you did those review?

Ms RAMKUMAR: We have a routine compliance review program where we conduct compliance reviews on four councils during the year. That covers a range of different areas under the *Local Government Act*, which includes financial, governance and operational. Where we receive complaints or concerns from external parties, local government inspectors assess the information provided and instigate a compliance review so that we have the authority to ask questions of the councils and do the compliance review thoroughly.

Mr EDGINGTON: What are issues that might form part of a special-purpose review?

Ms RAMKUMAR: It varies from concerns about procurement practices not being followed in accordance with the local government legislation; recruitment practices, where the local government legislation requires councils to have an open, fair and transparent process; to where we get allegations that a practice did not happen in a council. We look at the files to make sure the recruitment process was conducted properly.

Mr EDGINGTON: What was the outcome of the special-purpose reviews? Were there any adverse findings?

Ms RAMKUMAR: I would not call them adverse findings, they were just poor practice. We provided feedback to councils that there are ways to improve internal practices to show better accountability according to the legislation.

Mr PAECH: Recommendations for improvement are provided to the councils.

Mr EDGINGTON: At what point would you follow through to make sure the recommendations have been implemented?

Ms RAMKUMAR: We follow through on all compliance reviews. Each compliance review has an issues finding. It makes reference to the legislation we conduct the review under and points to the evidence we based our conclusion on. We come up with a recommended remedial action that we request the council complete, give a due date and give the council guidance on how it can remedy the findings from the compliance review process.

Mr EDGINGTON: Have all those findings been remedied at this point?

Ms RAMKUMAR: Some of them are in progress.

Mr PAECH: It is safe to say that no occurrence is closed until the agency has worked with the local government regarding implementation of the recommendation. It remains open. On average, in addition to the reviews Meeta has been talking about, a full compliance review is done of every council on a four-yearly basis. Those cases remain open until we can see that the recommendations have been implemented.

Mr EDGINGTON: Are there any compliance reviews outstanding beyond two years?

Ms RAMKUMAR: Of the seven that we conducted in the last 12 months, no.

Mr EDGINGTON: Are there any outstanding from previous years?

Ms RAMKUMAR: There may be one council that has a few outstanding issues but we are working with it and addressing those matters.

Mr PAECH: Compliance was reviewed with the changes to the *Local Government Act* and the different reporting required as a consequence of the amendments.

Mr EDGINGTON: Under the new legislation there is a requirement for training to be provided to councillors and local authorities. Has that been completed for all councils and local authorities?

Mr PAECH: Two modules need to be completed in order to have compliance. As of 16 June 2022, 31 face-to-face training sessions have been provided to 131 out of 152 council members. There is ongoing work but it is being done within the appropriate time frames.

Mr EDGINGTON: What is the time frame to complete that training?

Mr PAECH: It is a 12-month window from declaration as a member.

Mr EDGINGTON: Have local authorities received training?

Mr PAECH: At this stage the priority is making sure we are compliant with elected members. That is specified in the act. There is no time definition for local authorities. We are working with local councils in collaboration regarding what training might be for local authorities.

Mr EDGINGTON: What has the cost been to the department to deliver training to councillors?

Mr PAECH: That is all being done within the appropriation to the department.

Mr EDGINGTON: What is the overall budget for that training?

Mr PAECH: The costs come from agency core costs. Existing staff in their normal jobs, reviewing compliance or visiting local governments across the Territory, are able to build on that and provide compliance with mandatory training.

Mr EDGINGTON: It is delivered by staff rather than external providers?

Mr PAECH: Yes, that is correct.

Mr EDGINGTON: Can you give us a brief overview of what the training covers?

Mr PAECH: The training provided initially is about the role and obligations you have as an elected member under the act; what you can and cannot do; the code of conduct; and confidentiality as an elected member

and the sensitive materials you come across. The second module is about good governance practices; interpreting the financial statements; motions before council and how to work through them; and councillor or alderman—conduct, depending on where you are. It is the minimum foundation, knowledge and skills of being an elected member.

Mr EDGINGTON: Is that similar to what is delivered to local authorities?

Mr PAECH: It will be similar—rights and responsibilities as a local authority member and person who represents various areas of the community; working with the local authorities on the annual appropriation that each authority gets towards community projects; good governance on keeping records; and the development of motions or community consultation on how to best spend the local authority funds.

Mr EDGINGTON: What is the budget allocation for each local authority managed by the Barkly Regional Council, Central Desert Regional Council and Roper Gulf Regional Council? On what date will each council receive their allocated funds?

Mr PAECH: For the Barkly Regional Council the local authority funding is \$458,800; for Central Desert Regional Council it is \$542,800; and for the Roper Gulf it is \$876,200. It fluctuates for communities within each local council area.

Mr EDGINGTON: Those allocations are for 2022–23?

Mr PAECH: The numbers I quoted you are 2021–22. They will be the same figures moving forward.

Mr EDGINGTON: Has each council received its entire budget allocation?

Mr PAECH: Within the local authorities each community has two years to expend the funds. If they do not then they are returned to the department. We will work as best we can with the regional executive director to identify projects so a community does not miss out on the investment. In instances where projects cannot be identified the funds are returned to the department, reprioritised in the local government agency and then distributed back out.

Mr EDGINGTON: Did the Barkly Regional Council receive the full \$458,800 in this financial year?

Mr PAECH: By 30 June it will have received the full funds.

Mr EDGINGTON: They do not have it yet. Has Central Desert received its \$542,800?

Mr PAECH: I am happy to take the question on notice so we can provide you with accurate information.

Mr EDGINGTON: Perhaps before we take it on notice, I have the same question for the Roper Gulf Regional Council. Has it received its \$876,200 this financial year? If not, why not?

Ms RAMKUMAR: In regard to the local authority the project funding as at 31 March was:

- Barkly Regional Council has not received any of its funding for this financial year
- Central Desert has received its full funding
- East Arnhem has only received \$405,000 of \$1.2m
- MacDonnell Regional Council has received \$400,000 of the \$568,400 it has allocated
- Roper Gulf has not received any funding
- West Arnhem Regional Council has received \$595,000 of the \$625,000 it is entitled to.

The reason for the shortfall in funding is that the council has not acquitted its funding for the previous year. Until we receive the acquittal for each local authority via the council we do not release the funds. We go back to the council and ask for an explanation. It can be varied. A lot of it is because of the ongoing effects of COVID and being unable to supply into communities. We work with councils to help get LA projects off the ground. The Northern Territory Government's vaccination mandate put a halt on a couple of the councils.

Now that has been lifted we can proceed with releasing funds for councils where one elected member was not vaccinated.

Mr EDGINGTON: Which council was impacted by the vaccine mandate?

Ms RAMKUMAR: Roper Gulf Regional Council and MacDonnell Regional Council.

Mr EDGINGTON: The full \$876,200 was withheld by local government because one councillor had not had their vaccination?

Ms RAMKUMAR: No, there were issues with councils' acquittal receipts as well. The vaccine mandate only came out on 24 December. Under the grant funding agreements councils have to acquit funding by 31 August. We were trying to get councils to give us acquittals. Under the funding terms and conditions for LAPF grants, councils have two years to fully spend the money. When they do not spend the money we either reduce this year's allocation or work with the council to find the reason and give an extension for the funding they should have spent. We then offer them this year's funding.

Mr PAECH: We are working with them on acquittal processes to make sure they are completed. With that policy setting changing, there is no reason that if the grants are acquitted the funds cannot be paid.

Mr EDGINGTON: Will Roper Gulf Regional Council be receiving its \$876,202 by 30 June?

Mr PAECH: If the grants are acquitted and there is full compliance, we will proceed with the funds.

Mr EDGINGTON: When it comes to acquittals, is that for each local authority or is it an overall acquittal?

Mr PAECH: Each local authority has to acquit the funds and project acquittals for what each community has carried out over the period.

Mr EDGINGTON: If one local authority has not been acquitted does that impact on another local authority in the same region?

Mr PAECH: That would be a matter for the regional council to make sure it is measuring compliance and accountability across its footprint area.

Mr EDGINGTON: I heard some council talk about LG 2030. What is it?

Mr PAECH: LG 2030 is a document created in collaboration with local government and the Northern Territory government. It is a vision document for local government in the future.

Mr EDGINGTON: Is that a public document?

Mr PAECH: A number of working groups have been undertaken to develop the strategy. It is still in the developmental stage.

Mr EDGINGTON: How long has the LG 2030 document been in progress? When did it commence?

Mr PAECH: For anything to be successful in collaboration with 17 councils and the Local Government Association of the Northern Territory it will take time to iron out varying views and make sure our shared vision, goals and aspirations are together. That volume of work continues and it is something that has been participated by local government councils.

Mr EDGINGTON: When did the preparation of LG 2030 kick off?

Mr PAECH: The concept started in the 2019–20 financial period. We have progressively met and had working group meetings.

Mr EDGINGTON: Who is the driving force behind it? Is it your department, LGANT, the councils or a combination?

Mr PAECH: It is a local government strategy. We provide secretariat support and participate where required. It has been handed over to local government to progress the next steps for the strategy.

Mr EDGINGTON: What is the time frame to complete it?

Mr PAECH: I do not want to pre-empt or speak on behalf of the member councils and the Local Government Association for the Northern Territory. It is with them. I support them on the timing and how they want to progress that document.

Mr EDGINGTON: I thought the department was part of this?

Mr PAECH: We have been involved and supported where we could. We handed it over to the Local Government Association of the Northern Territory and the member councils; they will work on the next steps.

Mr EDGINGTON: What budget allocation have you handed over to develop this 2030 strategy?

Mr PAECH: The document has been produced with stakeholders from within all our existing budgets: the department of Local Government; the member councils; and the Local Government Association of the Northern Territory. We are working with local governments across the Territory, the member councils, on where they set the priorities and on resourcing identification.

Mr EDGINGTON: Is there a budget allocation for the Barkly Regional Deal within the Department of the Chief Minister and Cabinet this year?

Mr PAECH: Not within this output.

Mr EDGINGTON: Does Darwin City Deal fall within this output?

Mr PAECH: No.

Mr EDGINGTON: Is there any funding under this output directed at helping councils address the rising levels of antisocial behaviour and crime in the Territory?

Mr PAECH: I recently met with the Local Government Association of the Northern Territory. They talked about a number of innovative ideas for taking on a more active role in community safety. I will continue to meet with the Local Government Association and member councils about what opportunities they have.

Regarding a budget appropriation, there is not an itemised allocation.

Mr EDGINGTON: LGANT recently called for the Chief Minister to invite all local government council mayors and presidents to meet as a matter of urgency to identify actions to address antisocial behaviour and crime. Crime is making the attraction and retention of local government council staff in certain areas of the Territory difficult, which has a flow-on effect to service delivery and maintenance of infrastructure. Has the Chief Ministers responded to this request? Will she be meeting with all the councils?

Mr PAECH: That is a question for the Chief Minister. I had the opportunity to accompany Chief Minister Natasha Fyles to a meeting between the President and Chief Executive Officer of the Local Government Association of the Northern Territory, where they talked in detail about a number of matters. The Minister for Police, Fire and Emergency Services also reached out and spoke to the Local Government Association about attending one of its biannual forums or conferences. It is on the radar for the Northern Territory Government. We value the contributions made in local government. I commend those local governments moving beyond the scope of roads, rates and rubbish and becoming more involved in a number of community matters.

Mr EDGINGTON: How many mayors and presidents have you met with?

Mr PAECH: I have been the minister for a while now. I have met with a number of them. I appreciate the work every one of them does.

Mr EDGINGTON: Have you specifically discussed crime and antisocial behaviour in some of these areas?

Mr PAECH: There are a number of portfolio responsibilities in Local Government. Local governments are not homogenous councils—each council has different priorities and wants to have input with government. Some councils raise it and we work with them on a response. Other councils raise other issues. It is on a council-by-council basis. In every part of the Northern Territory, every regional, council and shire council is different and they all have different ideas to work within their areas.

Mr EDGINGTON: Were local councils and local authorities eligible for any COVID support, similar to what was offered to businesses?

Mr PAECH: We have done in previous years. As we were stepping out of the pandemic, it has not been done this year.

Mr EDGINGTON: There is nothing specific?

Mr PAECH: No, nothing specific. We provided through myCouncil—that was myDarwin, myKatherine and myAlice—and within Litchfield and the Barkly.

Mr EDGINGTON: When will you be making a decision about the Cox-Daly and Marrakai-Douglas Daly incorporation?

Mr PAECH: At this stage there is no decision to make. As the Local Government minister, I am making sure there are opportunities to reform things where possible. We have had a paper out on Have Your Say and the department met with people from the Cox-Daly region and the Marrakai Progress Association to talk about the process. There is no decision before us, we are doing consultation work. If that results in potential options for incorporation everyone in those areas will have the ability to be involved in the consultation process.

Mr EDGINGTON: The process is not about incorporation?

Mr PAECH: As a former local government representative, you would understand that local government is an area that constantly needs to be supported to look at reform. I am making sure everyone has access to local governments across the Territory because they play a vital role. Local government is the first tier of government that people access regularly in their everyday lives. I make no apologies for considering options and looking at what we can do in the space of local government reform across the board.

Mr EDGINGTON: One of those options is not to incorporate? Will you consider that?

Mr PAECH: That is true. An option might be to remain with the status quo with no incorporation or there could be incorporation options. We will work through it. A range of people applied through Have Your Say and departmental staff met with people in the Cox area, and the Douglas Daly and Marrakai regions. You and the Member for Goyder were at the Marrakai conversations. It is about constantly looking at ways in which we can consider reform, if appropriate.

Mr EDGINGTON: Some of the people in those areas have the impression that the decision is inevitable. Can you confirm that you have not made a decision that these areas will be incorporated?

Mr PAECH: There is no paper on my desk to incorporate any area. I am consulting. We have the Have Your Say and meetings, and these are considerations. The Local Government Association of the Northern Territory has, for a long time, been calling for a process to consider these options. As the Local Government minister, I want to make sure we are looking at all options.

Mr EDGINGTON: Has there been any decisions made at Northcrest? Have the residents been consulted about incorporation?

Mr PAECH: No decision has been made for Northcrest. There is an agreement in place for them to receive municipal services. This time the agreement is in place; it does not expire. As we get closer to the expiry, we will run a consultation process.

Mr EDGINGTON: How many councillors were not sufficiently vaccinated by the relevant CHO direction deadlines?

Mr PAECH: Four.

Mr DEPUTY CHAIR: Being 3.30 pm, time has run out. On behalf of the committee, thank you Minister Paech for your attendance today; and thank you to the staff across all your departments.

Mr PAECH: I thank the department, the Local Government staff and our (inaudible) for preparing the work; and the hard-working public servants who worked hard on the briefs for estimates.

I offer an ongoing invitation to members of the Estimates Committee, if you wish to have a briefing on a particular matter. Member for Barkly, if you wish to have a further brief on the unincorporated areas, I am happy to provide that.

The committee suspended.

MINISTER KIRBY'S PORTFOLIOS

BUSINESS, JOBS AND TRAINING

AGRIBUSINESS AND FISHERIES

MAJOR EVENTS

DEPARTMENT OF INDUSTRY, TOURISM AND TRADE

Mr CHAIR: Welcome back to estimates 2022. We are onto Agribusiness and Fisheries; Business, Jobs and Training; and Major Events. I welcome Minister Kirby and invite you to introduce the officials accompanying you.

Mr KIRBY: I would like to re-introduce our Chief Executive Officer, Shaun Drabsch; Chief Financial Officer, Joanna Frankenfeld; and Luke Bowen and Phil Hausler from our ag entities.

Mr CHAIR: I invite you to make a brief opening statement and then we will have questions relating to the statement. The committee will then consider any whole-of-government budget and fiscal strategy-related questions, before moving on to output-specific questions and finally non-output specific budget-related questions.

I invite the shadow minister to ask questions first, followed by other committee members. Following that we can have any other party members asking questions. The committee has agreed that members may join in on a line of questioning pursued by the shadow minister instead of waiting. Hopefully, that means more continuity in the questions.

Mr KIRBY: I acknowledge Mr Shaun Drabsch and all of his hard-working team at the Department of Industry, Tourism and Trade, not just for preparing for estimates but for the power of work they have done over the last 12 months. It has been another challenging 12 months for the whole Territory as we transitioned from keeping COVID out to living with it. Territory businesses were brilliant in the way they stepped up. They rode the bumps, from restrictions to the challenges COVID presented in attracting workers.

Our business community faced a difficult year. The work the DITT team has done has not cracked everything but we have solved a mountain of challenges with business. As minister for Business I commend them for the suite of measures and packages they quickly rolled out to ensure that the Territory is growing out better than every other jurisdiction across the nation; it has been outstanding.

Agribusiness and fisheries made massive contributions to the Territory economy in 2020–21. The ag, forestry, fishing and industry contributed \$924m to the Territory's economy, up by a whopping 23.7% from the previous year. The plant-based industries are worth over \$350m. The beef and cattle industry produced over 600,000 head for live export and domestic markets. The ongoing investment by the Territory government in these sectors shows our commitment to creating jobs and opportunities and our work to fulfil the recommendations of the TERC.

Our priorities are being further scoped and underpinned by the development of a 10-year agribusiness and aquaculture strategy for the Territory, which outlines the vision of the industry. The strategy is being drafted in consultation with the industry and recognises the massive role the sector plays in the Territory economy. This work is being supported by DITT's sustainable agribusiness and precincts team, which is charged with driving new investment in this sector and working with existing landholders.

The teams are working with the Infrastructure, Investment and Major Project Commissioners to facilitate new investment. They are also working with existing ag investors, land councils and traditional owners seeking to further develop pastoral leases and Aboriginal lands. Ag development will bring significant ongoing

opportunities, sustainable economic benefits to the Territory and regional development and investment outcomes.

There is no doubt that biosecurity dangers are a major threat, not just to the Territory but around the nation—it is no different in our agribusiness sector. We have invested \$1.9m ongoing in the new budget to boost our biosecurity capacity, to prepare for and reduce the impacts of pest and disease incursion. Lumpy skin disease and foot-and-mouth disease are on our doorstep, just to the north of us. We recently detected Japanese encephalitis, American serpentine leaf miner, mango shoot looper and banana freckle. Each of these diseases and pests are challenging for the industry to deal with. DITT works closely with the industry to protect our industries and produce. The Territory plays a critical role as a front line for biosecurity surveillance in our region. It is important work that we, the Australian Government and industry do to lift our investment and vigilance.

Along with the infrastructure to support growth of the agribusiness and fisheries sector, the Territory government is focused on making sure that there is workforce to underpin the boost. We heard the concerns across every industry across the Northern Territory and have responded. We have been working with the Australian Government to attract overseas workers through various programs. In 2021, 215 seasonal workers came from Samoa to address workforce shortages in sectors including agriculture. This was followed with workers coming to the Territory under the Pacific Labor Mobility Scheme in October 2021, with about 140 workers arriving from Timor-Leste, Vanuatu and Fiji so far.

The announcement of a new Australian Government visa program in August 2021 and the opening of the Territory's borders to international arrivals in December has supported employers in the agriculture sector with greater access to workers from select partner countries.

Alongside the Territory's traditional products such as melons and mangoes, the Territory government is supporting industry to diversify into other crops such as modern cotton. There has been significant interest from investors in Territory properties, including pastoral leases and Aboriginal land, to further intensify land use.

Our live exports—the Territory's more than \$600m cattle industry has seen record prices as the sector worked to overcome the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. A strong domestic market demand for animals for restocking, and biosecurity concerns in other countries, has seen prices remain strong locally, at \$5 per kilogram in the short term. In 2021, about 440,000 head of cattle left the Territory through the live export trade to interstate and overseas destinations, mainly Indonesia.

As part of the Territory government's support for agribusiness and the fisheries sector, a number of research facilities located up and down the track are creating jobs for our regions. The Territory's commercial fishing and aquaculture industries injects \$136m into the economy each year, creating over 900 jobs. Given our extensive coastline, there is potential to expand the aquaculture industry across species such as barramundi, prawns, trepan and tropical rock oysters.

This year, Darwin Aquaculture Centre achieved a record number of more than one million black-lip rock oysters produced in the first half of this season. It is a key step towards establishing a new industry across the Territory coastline.

In this year's budget, the Territory government announced that \$1.29m will go towards expanding and diversifying the Darwin Aquaculture Centre as a centre of excellence in tropical aquaculture research and development, and the creation of a fisheries and aquaculture innovation hub. The centre of excellence will position the Territory as a regional leader in tropical aquaculture development and allow it to build on the success of projects like the barramundi breeding program. We have some of the best managed and most sustainable fisheries in the world. We are renowned for the quality of our seafood.

DITT's fisheries branch has long-term relationships with Aboriginal Territorians to provide training and support to marine ranger groups in compliance, scientific monitoring, commercial fishing, and mentoring programs to facilitate jobs on country. Highlights this year include support for the Aboriginal fishing mentor program, Aboriginal education and training programs and the tropical rock oyster industry development project. The Aboriginal fishing mentor program is developing skills and capacity for Aboriginal participation in the Territory's commercial fishing industry through training and support of Aboriginal coastal licence holders.

The Territory is the best place in the world for rec fishing, which is a huge part of our lifestyle. That is why this government is investing in opportunities to enhance recreational fishing. We are consulting about support

for the future of rec fishing in the Northern Territory as a part of the new rec fishing development plan. The current plan expires at the end of 2022. It has been focused on ensuring a diverse range of high-quality experiences and healthy fish stocks, maximising the value of recreational fishing for Territorians, tourists and the local economy.

Under our rec fishing futures program, it was great to see Coleman's Contracting & Earthmoving recently awarded a contract to construct a new car park and ablution facility at the Daly River boat ramp.

Each year barramundi fingerlings are released into popular fishing locations such as Manton Dam, Marlow Lagoon, McMinns Lagoon and Rum Jungle Lake as part of our annual restocking program. The barramundi population in Manton Dam's freshwater system needs saltwater to breed; they have no capacity to reproduce. This makes the annual restocking of the dam vital for sustaining the barramundi population, with 18,000 fish, ranging from 15 to 20 centimetres, released into the Manton Dam during late April—early May in 2022.

Each year we support rec fishing grants, which provide \$15,000 for small grant projects and \$100,000 for priority large grant projects. Last year I announced seven Territory-based not-for-profit organisations were granted funding for 10 projects under the Territory's economic Recreational Fishing Grants Scheme to develop infrastructure, better recreation fishing experience or support a vibrant, accessible and inclusive recreational fishing community.

We have been working tirelessly to support businesses, employers and employees to adapt to the changing economic environment. As we transition out of the pandemic we must keep stepping up, committed to growing our economy to \$40bn by 2030 and skilling and attracting an additional 35,000 workers. To achieve that we need to ensure there are jobs for Territorians, for their children and for those who choose to move here and make the Territory their home. Big challenges include ensuring we have a skilled and capable workforce, creating an environment which makes it easy for business to do business and protecting our agribusiness sectors from the threat of inhibiting pests and disease.

COVID business funding started with business hardship grants to support businesses through the pandemic and, more recently, provide urgent relief for the impact of the COVID Omicron wave. We have a range of grants. I will not run through the detail of all of them but there is the Tourism Survival Fund; the Roadhouse to Recovery grant; our business growth programs and pivot programs; and Biz Secure continues to help people out.

I give a shout out to our small business champions. The Territory Business Centre supports more than 76,000 requests every year. This includes processing of 27,000 applications for licences and more than 49,000 general inquiries for assistance. Our small business champions take care of a large range of those queries.

More than 2,500 organisations have lodged more than three 3,500 applications through the Northern Territory Government's Can-do online portal, which makes it easier for businesses to do business.

The Business Innovation Strategy was launched this year including includes initiatives like the acceleration program, digital partnerships programs, innovation and next generation programs, which all support businesses to move into the next century.

As one of our largest buyers of goods and services, the Territory government injects more than \$3bn into the local economy every year. The NTG procurement framework, through the Buy Local Plan, demonstrates the importance we place on economic development and business growth by maximising opportunities for local Territory businesses to participate in our procurement. As at the end of May 2022, 76% of all government contracts were awarded to Territory businesses. The value of the contracts awarded to Territory businesses was over \$1.1bn or 89%.

We have worked hard to increase Aboriginal economic participation. Our Aboriginal Procurement Policy is a targeted approach to increase opportunities for Aboriginal businesses, business enterprises, community-controlled organisations and Aboriginal Territorians to participate in government procurement activities. The government is committed to improving economic outcomes for Aboriginal Territorians. It applies Territory grant contracts with an estimated value of \$15,000 or greater. Existing Aboriginal enterprises can apply to be recognised as an Aboriginal business enterprise under a transitioning agreement for a period of 18 months, providing a step change in the advancement of Aboriginal employment and business opportunities in the Northern Territory.

The Aboriginal Business Development Program, which provides grants of up to \$30,000 to support Aboriginal people starting or expanding a business in the Northern Territory, has delivered nearly \$779,000 in grants,

supporting 55 businesses. The Aboriginal Responsive Skilling Grants program provided more than \$1.3m in grant funding to support the immediate skilling needs of Aboriginal Territorians living in urban, regional and remote communities. The Aboriginal Workforce Grants supported initiatives or projects that resulted in more Aboriginal Territorians entering employment and developing careers within the workplace.

Attracting workers and skilling Territorians is one of our biggest tasks due to the massive labour force challenges across Australia and the world. Each year our government invests over \$80m into VET initiatives and works with more than 50 private RTOs. To end of February 2022, more than 3,700 Territorians were in apprenticeships and traineeships. These people are the workers of tomorrow, young—and sometimes not so young—Territorians who will fill our skills gaps and drive us into the \$40bn economy by 2030. More than a quarter of the apprentices and trainees are Aboriginal.

We have had big wins getting Territorians qualified in areas like electrotechnology, carpentry, engineering, fabrication and trade. We will continue to build on those skills and opportunities.

Business and skilled migration plays an important role addressing skills shortages, increases productivity, drives investment and creates jobs. This year we launched a \$12.8m global work campaign to attract workers to the Northern Territory. To date the campaign has delivered more than 16 million engagements and led to 2,000 job applications across the Northern Territory.

We launched the Work Stay Play campaign, designed to drive local worker attraction. The second round, opened in March this year, was designed to help fill critical skills. This program has helped us attract 800 desperately needed workers to the Northern Territory.

The Designated Area Migration Agreement is a tailored, employer-sponsored, demand-driven program. It suits the Territory's business environment with a range of concessions in English skills and qualifications. I am proud that we were the first jurisdiction to negotiate and implement a DAMA in 2015. The second DAMA was implemented in January 2019, which included a permanent resident's pathway. This agreement is in place until 2024. More than 300 Territory businesses have used the DAMA since its implementation, helping bring hundreds of new workers to the Northern Territory.

Late last year the Australian Government announced the establishment of a new program to provide employers in agriculture, aquaculture, forestry and meat processing better access to skilled, semi and low-skilled workers from select partner countries. This is another example of the Northern Territory Government doing all it can, working with its federal counterparts, to make sure we have workers to drive our economy forward.

Vietnam has recently become the first country to join that program. We are working with other countries to extend that into the future. Under the former program, more than 350 overseas workers came to the Territory and provided help to industries like melon and mango farming.

There is a lot happening throughout the Northern Territory, for us to be proud of. Our commitment to working with businesses to grow, support and protect our industries will help us achieve a \$40bn economy by 2030.

Territorians are a resilient bunch. We are prepared for a strong comeback. I acknowledge our business owners, workers and locals for the great work they do every day. I commend the department for all its hard work, and all the people who work within the department as we have transitioned out. We often celebrate how well we have done throughout COVID. Over 400 businesses opened up in the Northern Territory in the last 12 months, which per capita is a remarkable amount. We are happy and proud of the work.

Ms BOOTHBY: I was listening intently to hear you talk about veterans, given that you are also the Minister for Veterans' Affairs and this is your time to shine. In this estimates hearings we have asked twice, to different ministers, about that budget. Both times we were pointed to you to answer those questions. Is now the time to ask Veterans' Affairs questions?

Mr KIRBY: As you will see in the folder in front of you, we do not have an output. We explained last year that the veterans funding allocation sits with Defence, which at that stage was probably Minister Manison. It is now with the Chief Minister. I am not sure which two ministers you asked the questions of.

I do not have funding allocations for our veterans. I am happy to explain the range of work and engagements we do with veterans. As we explained last year, the majority of the funding comes from the federal government. I am happy to explain the progress on different programs and working with the ESOs.

Ms BOOTHBY: It also sits under the Department of Industry, Tourism and Trade?

Mr KIRBY: As the Veterans' Affairs minister, the operations sit with me. It is not unusual for the funding allocation not to sit with the line minister. The budget allocations sit with the Chief Minister.

Ms BOOTHBY: We asked the Chief Minister to answer questions about Veterans' Affairs and she pointed to you; Minister Manison did the same in Northern Australian Development.

As you are able to go into some of the details? What is the 2022–23 budget allocated to Veterans' Affairs?

Mr KIRBY: We do not have an output for the Veterans' Affairs portfolio. I am happy to take that question on notice. I did not refer to veterans in my opening remarks for that reason.

Question on Notice No 7.1

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

Ms BOOTHBY: What is the 2022–23 budget allocated to Veterans' Affairs?

Mr CHAIR: Minister, do you accept the question?

Mr KIRBY: Yes.

Mr CHAIR: The question asked by the Member for Brennan has been allocated number 7.1.

Ms BOOTHBY: Why does Veterans' Affairs not have its own budget output?

Mr KIRBY: It is not unusual for Treasury. An example is Power and Water, which has its own line minister who does the operations. The overarching minister in that situation is the Treasurer.

Answer to Question on Notice No 7.1

Mr KIRBY: The allocation for Veterans' Affairs for next year is \$450,000.

Mr KIRBY: Not every line item we cover across the breadth of our portfolios has an output in the budget papers.

Ms BOOTHBY: Why are you the Minister for Veterans' Affairs when you have no oversight of it or the funding? I am curious about how you can do your job in that space?

Mr KIRBY: I am proud to be the Veterans' Affairs minister. I am happy to explain the matters we get involved in with our veterans. I was fortunate, after the 2020 election, to be appointed as Veterans' minister.

The federal minister, who was Darren Chester, came to the Northern Territory for the Bombing of Darwin in 2021. We arranged for him to meet with a number of our veterans so he could hear their issues and concerns. He listened intently and took them on board.

At the time, a primary concern was Mates4Mates, which worked closely with the federal government on allocation of funding for veteran wellbeing centres in the Northern Territory. There was concern that there may have been a delay; that centres were not up and running as quickly as possible; and about what the \$500m had been allocated to. Even though the Territory is a reasonably small place and the Top End even more so there was concern that veterans may not have the capacity to get from Darwin to Palmerston or from the rural area into Palmerston, if that was where the services hub was going to be based.

The opportunity to connect Darren, the federal minister, with our local veteran community is the type of work I will do as Veterans' minister. We regularly meet with local veterans. We set up our overarching veteran taskforce. This year, before the Bombing of Darwin commemoration, many of our federal ministers came to town, not just to attend the commemoration but the federal taskforce meeting in Darwin. Our local veteran

taskforce also meets to discuss problems and hopefully come up with a range of solutions. We meet at one of the local cafes as often as we can.

One of the most significant things we did in recent years was lobby, through our local federal member, to get the veteran suicide taskforce to Darwin. We would not have been able to do that if we did not have a local Veterans' minister.

I understand your queries regarding allocations of funding and things like that. The benefit of having a local Veterans' minister is to directly and intently engage with the veteran community, pass their queries on to federal members and liaise directly with federal minister to create the best outcomes for our community. We are proud of the work our veterans have done. It has been a tough time, locally. I will not speak any more about that.

We put in as much support as we can. I worked closely with the Health minister over previous years to make sure we had beds put aside for serving or retired veterans in the mental health facilities at RDH and that they have direct access to the emotional and medical assistance they need because these can be trying times.

A lot of veterans want to move to or stay in the Northern Territory. The roles they had were punishing. A lot of people feel much better in a warm climate. This is a garrison town and a lot of people hope to stay here beyond their final posting. When they retire, we want to make it as easy as possible for people and have the best facilities we can. One of the challenges is that there are a lot of different ESOs that operate in similar but competing spaces. We work with those ESOs to make sure funding is used best. We are proud of all our veterans.

It was not in my opening statement but I am happy to take a couple of questions on the fly.

Ms BOOTHBY: I can hear your passion in this space, which is why I am curious about why you are not across the budget. Surely if there was more in the budget for Veterans' Affairs, you could do more of the work that you want to do to assist Territorians who are veterans.

Mr KIRBY: The funding for Veterans' Affairs and ESOs—the essential service organisations—is through federal arrangements. That might help Soldier On or Mates4Mates. The RSLs have different relationships—some are funded through their own money-raising and opportunities like that. We have an allocation and the majority is towards wages. The rest of our time, energy and effort goes into supporting the ESOs and vets as much as we can.

Ms BOOTHBY: Do you have the information on how much is claimed each year by veterans as part of the NT Concession Scheme? I am happy to put that on notice if you do not have that detail.

Mr KIRBY: A lot of veterans try to live a quiet life. Even through surveys we have done to reach out to people, it is often difficult to get them to step forward and acknowledge they are a veteran, for different reasons. We have asked similar questions about breakdowns of different services we offer to veterans and cards they might have access to. We have tried to drill down into those numbers.

I can have a look at the information. I do not think we have definitive dollar figures. For a range of reasons it proved too difficult through the way the funding allocations go out—not that it was a Treasury issue. I do not think there was a way we could appropriately track it. I am happy to make the query and get back to you.

Question on Notice No 7.2

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

Ms BOOTHBY: How much is claimed each year by veterans as part of the NT Concession Scheme?

Mr CHAIR: Minister, do you accept the question?

Mr KIRBY: I accept the question. Some of the allocations are made through Territory Families as well. Between that minister and I, we will try to get the best information we can.

Mr CHAIR: The question asked by the Member for Brennan has been allocated number 7.2.

Ms BOOTHBY: What essential goods and services are offered through the NT Concession Scheme to eligible veterans? For example, a gold card holder is entitled to X, Y, Z, gold card TPI et cetera.

Mr KIRBY: Those allocations are through Territory Families. You can put a question on notice for me, to forward to them. I am more than happy to do that.

Question on Notice No 7.3

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

Ms BOOTHBY: What essential goods and services are offered through the NT Concession Scheme to eligible veterans? For example, a gold card holder is entitled to X, Y and Z; and a gold card TPI holder is entitled to X, Y and Z.

Mr CHAIR: Minister, do you accept the question?

Mr KIRBY: Yes.

Mr CHAIR: The question asked by the Member for Brennan has been allocated number 7.3.

Ms BOOTHBY: What is the funding allocation to the NT Concession Scheme for veterans each year? How are claims acquitted? What happens to money that is not claimed?

Mr KIRBY: That part of the program does not sit with us.

Mr DRABSCH: There are no explicit schemes for veterans to get a particular concession. Concessions are available to veterans, for example for motor vehicle registration. The records are kept on the basis of those people who have applied for concessions, whether it be veterans, seniors or other cards. That is why it is hard to get precise data to identify the value of concessions provided to our veteran community. A lot of people take them up but many choose not to.

Ms BOOTHBY: It seems the Veteran Affairs portfolio is just a name without budge or outcomes. I wonder if there is even any care because there was no representation from the Northern Territory Government, including yourself, at a recent event—the parade and cocktail reception commemorating the Battle of Binh Ba on 9 June. Did you not feel that was an important event to go to as the Minister for Veterans' Affairs?

Mr KIRBY: I am happy to answer any questions related to budget allocations in our outputs. To make an allegation about my care or compassion for the veteran community—I get to as many events as I possibly can. There is no way anybody could get to every event. I could highlight a number of veteran and Defence events that I have not seen you at but I would not do that—it would be a grubby act.

Mr BURGOYNE: What is the number one threat to agriculture in the Northern Territory?

Mr KIRBY: There are a number of ongoing threats. Foot-and-mouth disease is an ongoing threat that has been around for many years. It is prevalent in a lot of countries that most people in this room have travelled to, particularly pre-COVID. It is a disease we, our airports and our ports are familiar with. We do put a range of local and a federal energy into making sure the risks are moderated. Thankfully, we have done a good job.

Lumpy skin disease presents a different risk. It is more airborne than previous diseases—with prevailing winds and our proximity to countries that already have the disease. Whether it is through aquaculture or agriculture there are a few things that set the Northern Territory aside—abundance is one of those things in our fishing. From an agriculture sense, our quality helps us stand well above a lot of other nations who are interested in trading in the same spaces we are in. Things like lumpy skin disease become an important problem for us to address.

We have had a number of incursions from plant-related diseases over previous years. Plant-related diseases manifest in a different way with capacity for different opportunities to rectify those problems. The animal-borne diseases present in a different way. Without trying to make crude similarities, it will not be that dissimilar to how we had to work through COVID. If we have incursions in the near future we will be looking at throwing a net over where the problem is to make sure we control it and then stepping controls back as it is safe to do

so. With plant-borne diseases you get more of an opportunity to methodically get around to different locations and step through identifying and eradicating the diseases.

Mr DRABSCH: There are a number of threats in the biosecurity area. To say which is number one is difficult. Lumpy skin disease and foot-and-mouth disease are evident in the Indonesian archipelago. Plant biosecurity risks also emerged recently.

I emphasise the importance we are placing on these biosecurity risks and the collaboration we have undertaken with the federal department of Agriculture, and Biosecurity Australia. Luke has recently been in central Java and Jakarta, talking to the Indonesian agricultural sector and government officials about agreements to exchange staff and personnel from Indonesia to the Territory and back to Indonesia in the biosecurity space to develop knowledge and understanding, share skills and plan for potentially imminent events.

Mr BOWEN: It keeps a lot of us awake at night. People across the Territory are aware of the important role livestock industries and the horticulture and agriculture sectors play. Over the last 10 years they were exposed to a lot of ongoing threats. We have had numerous incursions, from the mottle mosaic virus, with cucurbits; most recently, citrus canker; and banana freckle, which was eradicated. However, we just had a new outbreak in the Batchelor area.

We are fighting under the weight of increasing levels of incursions. Animal diseases have come into the country, literally blown in. For example, *e. canis*, which is a tick-borne disease affecting dogs; and fall armyworm, which has moved through the country quickly. These are airborne insects and lectins that have come into the country.

Livestock diseases and human-animal diseases are occupying a huge amount of attention, particularly Japanese encephalitis. It is an interesting case. A woman died in the Tiwi Islands in March last year and our laboratories identified, through surveillance activities, that it was a strain of Japanese encephalitis that has never been seen before. It is an Indonesian strain. Previously Japanese encephalitis has only been seen in the top of Queensland. Starting in March, this incursion has gone all the way down to South Australia, particularly the Murray-Darling basin. There has been a dramatic change in the way some of these diseases, insects and pests are moving. It can be due to wet conditions, heat, temperature and various other things.

Lumpy skin disease, which is a vector-borne disease, is particular concern. It affects bovines—buffalo and cattle. It is transferred by insects. If Australia was to have one notifiable case our domestic export trade in dairy, beef and live animals would stop overnight. All our international trade protocols mean that we could export from anywhere in this country if we got one case of lumpy skin disease. The same applies for foot-and-mouth disease.

Lumpy skin was first identified in Indonesia in March this year. It came out of Africa about eight years ago. It is a pox virus. It moved quickly into the Middle East through to India, Russia and China and then came rapidly down through Southeast Asia. The speed with which it has moved concerns us. It is now in Indonesia and Sumatra, as best we know. Most recently there has been a declaration of foot-and-mouth in Indonesia. It started in Java and is now in most of the provinces in Indonesia. That is particularly concerning because it is also masking, to some extent, the surveillance for lumpy skin. Foot-and-mouth is not a vector-borne disease; it is not moved by insects. The chance of it blowing in is remote but its mode of operation would be on people coming in, on equipment and the like through multiple potential ways—by air, by sea and through export activities and that sort of thing.

We are concerned about lumpy skin. I have just come off a national hook-up—I stayed here and some of our staff stayed here. Our Deputy Chief Veterinary Officer is in Canberra with people from the industry working on a national plan to respond to the threat posed by lumpy skin disease.

If we look at our agricultural sector in the Northern Territory, the value of production from agriculture is about \$1.3bn per year. The cattle industry makes up close to \$1bn of that production. Any one of these diseases would effectively shut that trade down—the domestic internal movements of livestock within the country would be at a standstill and we would not export any products overseas from this nation, period. It is a serious threat to the country and the Northern Territory.

Mr BURGOYNE: It is a \$1bn cost to industry in the Northern Territory should lumpy skin disease enter it?

Mr BOWEN: The value of production equates to about \$1bn. You could extrapolate that based on the flow-on effects from an incursion into the supply chains. It is hard to predict. Nationally, the estimate has been

revised. For foot-and-mouth disease, it was about \$50bn nationally. They are revising that figure to closer to \$80bn. The threat level has increased for most major exotic diseases.

Mr MALEY: You said it was full stop, period—is that forever? What sort of time frame?

Mr BOWEN: Australia negotiates every trade agreement. We trade with about 100 different countries around the world in, for example, meat products. For every country we trade with we need a trade protocol. The governments agree on selling something to another country. The animals have to be free from certain diseases and may have to meet certain protocols. Those protocols dictate the arrangement. In our protocols we are clean of most diseases. Our trade protocols explain and stipulate that we are free of certain diseases. If we become infected with a disease, it is part of a protocol that can then put the trade at risk.

Mr MALEY: For how long?

Mr BOWEN: Depending on the protocol, it might be for a period of one or three years.

Mr MALEY: If lumpy skin gets to the Territory and we export to a country that already has lumpy skin, would it still take three years to get the trade back up and running?

Mr BOWEN: It depends on the negotiations of the trade officials. The Territory Government has been seeking urgency on re-negotiation of trade agreements.

Mr MALEY: A three-year stoppage of cattle would be disastrous for the Territory economy. Are you doing the legwork now to make sure that if it does happen—fingers crossed it does not—we would be ready to go?

Mr DRABSCH: We are conscious of the seriousness of these threats and are actively working on it. We have increased the biosecurity budget and are working actively with the Commonwealth Government to develop plans and programs to prepare for the possible incursion and consequences.

Mr BURGOYNE: When I look at the revised budget for 2021–22 on page 93 of Budget Paper 3, it is reducing by \$2m to \$17m. At a time when we have so many biosecurity issues right on our doorstep, why are we reducing the funding to biosecurity and animal welfare?

Mr KIRBY: We have invested \$1.9m extra into biosecurity this year. We will work closely with our federal counterparts. The budget allocation from the 2022 budget to the 2023 budget is still \$17.4m. There are complexities regarding the variations this year. If we use foot-and-mouth as an example, the dollar figure invested would be a massive amount. It is hard to quantify, but we work closely with the federal government on it. If you attempted to put money away to budget for an incursion every year, it would be extremely difficult. We take the threat seriously.

Mr MALEY: The budget does show a \$2m decrease. Can you show us show us exactly where the \$1.9m increase is? The budget paper you released does not reflect what you are telling us.

Mr DRABSCH: The biosecurity and animal welfare output for the 2022–23 budget is \$17.054m, which is \$2.3m less than the revised budget of \$19.355m. It is a net decrease which reflects a decrease in external funding for programs that have finished their natural course, such as the browsing ant eradication program, implementing the e. canis pilot program and various plant biosecurity research and development grants. They add up to about \$3.5m.

There has been an increase in biosecurity livestock support and aquaculture biosecurity preparedness, which adds up to the just under \$2m we indicated. That creates a net of about \$2.3m reduction in the biosecurity and animal welfare output area.

There are similar changes in the budget numbers in the agriculture and fisheries outputs due to accounting adjustments, but it is fundamentally driven by the end of defined-time programs and offset by increases in livestock biosecurity officers, for example, which we are in the process of appointing to directly address the issues we have been discussing.

Mr MALEY: How many biosecurity officers do we have?

Mr BOWEN: One of the important things to place in context is that we are part of national agreements with governments across Australia and the Commonwealth, and also industry. The incursions we have been talking about come under the emergency animal disease agreements, which are cost shared with industry

and governments. A good example is citrus canker. We are part of a national agreement under the plant industries side as well. The program to eradicate citrus canker cost in excess of \$15m. Our share of that was under \$1m. Other jurisdictions and industry paid for the eradication.

Mr MALEY: That is if it is here. I am talking about spending money to stop it getting here. Once it is here we have a three-year stop—or whatever it might be—which is a disaster. What are you doing right now to stop it getting here and how much money are you spending on that?

Mr BOWEN: Under the budget there are three additional stock inspectors and two additional deputy health officers for animals and plants to support our biosecurity teams. There are an existing six stock inspectors out in the field, so those numbers have been boosted directly.

The network that we are part of across northern Australia is putting together plans for pre-incursion preparedness. Scenarios are being run as we are speak in Canberra. We were in a planning session today, which is continuing. It is of major concern and there is a lot of work. We do not want these diseases to enter Australia, there is no doubt about it.

The probability can be reduced by positive biosecurity at a national level on our borders and in Indonesia. Two weeks ago I spent a week-and-a-half in Indonesia with our Chief Veterinary Officer and people from the industry looking at the challenges they have. Foot-and-mouth, for example, was eradicated in Indonesia in 1986 through a vaccination program. They have been free of it since then and Indonesia has been a buffer for us. That dynamic has changed so it is important that we work, not just as a jurisdiction, but with the Commonwealth nationally, internationally and across northern Australia.

Plans to get in front of lumpy skin are being formulated. The likelihood of lumpy skin entering the country was estimated at about 8% when a threat assessment was done two years ago. That likelihood has increased for the next five years. There is a lot of work going on and a lot of resources being applied.

As far as the funding of response and preparedness work, we are part of a national agreement system, which is cost-share. We are in a position now where we are attracting funding from the Commonwealth and industry to work on this nationally.

Mr BURGOYNE: Is the budget sufficient to deal with the risks the \$1bn cattle industry faces?

Mr KIRBY: The entitlement is appropriate. The work we do has been outlined extensively through the committee—and the addition of extra people into the field to assist. I recently spoke with the Cattlemen's Association, NT Farmers and the Livestock Exporters. They all have programs where they reach overseas and do the best they can. Some of the funding also comes from the federal government and some is funded from within.

Make no mistake, we take the risk seriously. It is like asking the federal government if they had budget allocations for COVID turning up. You cannot possibly say that you have enough money squirreled away to deal with it. We are on the front foot in putting proactive measures in place, working with our near neighbours, internally and with Minister MacTiernan in Western Australia and Minsiter Furner in Queensland. There will be a northern Australia approach because this is where the threat will be the most serious.

Part of the response will be similar to COVID in shoring things up to make sure we give ourselves time for a vaccine to arrive. That is work we will do closely with the federal government. I am confident that we are doing all we can to keep these threats at bay.

Mr BURGOYNE: What representations have you made to the federal government to assist in dealing with foot-and-mouth disease, lumpy skin disease and Japanese encephalitis?

Mr KIRBY: We have made representations in writing to all our new federal ministers. I have had conversations with some. We will have more detailed conversations in the future. It is an interesting point.

Mr DRABSCH: We work closely with the federal department of Agriculture. There is a fortnightly hook-up of agricultural first secretaries, led by Andrew Metcalfe. We go around the jurisdictions and talk about the issues we are confronting. We regularly raise biosecurity risks and have been doing so for some time. That was also the mechanism by which we addressed the COVID issue and things like seasonal workers. We have a good working relationship with Andrew Metcalfe—I met him in Canberra a couple of months ago—and Biosecurity Australia.

We have a good ear from the federal government. There is strong collegiality between the jurisdictions about the risks these threats present, and an earnest desire for collaborative action. There is a history of that amongst agricultural agencies between the states, territories and the federal government.

Mr BOWEN: The threat assessment done by the Commonwealth a couple of years ago identified that the risk level was increasing for some of these major exotic diseases. The Commonwealth Government increased biosecurity by \$400m at the last budget or the one previously. That has manifested in operations across northern Australia, which points to collaboration of the Commonwealth.

The Territory government is spending \$44m on upgrading our biosecurity facilities at Berrimah Farm Science Precinct. We have a new molecular science block that has a biocontainment level 3 facility. It is the highest security facility in the north of Australia, surpassed only by the facility in Geelong, which is the Centre for Disease Preparedness. That one is a biocontainment level 4 facility.

What that means for us is that we can work on the most dangerous of viruses and pathogens in a secure facility where our staff can be safe, in order to quickly identify—if we have certain things being identified—and eliminate diseases. That is a significant investment. There is still more capital to be invested.

The Commonwealth Government northern quarantine services that work across northern Australia will be co-locating in our Berrimah Farm Science Precinct as well. We will get much closer cooperation when they are already working out of our laboratories, to get much faster and seamless response times, and surveillance capability in the north—rather than having to send samples elsewhere and those sorts of things.

That is part of our relationship with countries such as Indonesia and Timor. We are assisting our Chief Veterinary Officer and the director of our veterinary laboratories to go to Timor soon to initiate continued exchanges that will help build the level of biosecurity capability in Timor, which is an early warning for us. A number of things, such as African swine fever, have historically been through Timor and Indonesia. We keep a very close eye on them. It is the same for lumpy-skin, foot-and-mouth and a range of other things we are more familiar with, like rabies, which is endemic in our region.

Mr BURGOYNE: The question was specifically about what you asked for from the federal government. There has been an increase of \$2m since the 2021–22 original budget to this 2022–23 budget; and there is a \$2m decrease from the revised budget. Is \$2m enough to fight a virus that could take down a billion-dollar industry? Is that proportionate and responsible, given the climate we are amidst in northern Australia and the Northern Territory?

Mr KIRBY: The concern is not lost on us, it is a significant risk. These are significant industries for the Northern Territory and Australia. A range of investments have been made, such as the molecular lab—and the only other facility that is better than that is in Geelong. Other investments and in-kind opportunities were taken up, working closely with the federal government. You cannot put a dollar figure allocation on what is needed to ensure these types of threats stay at bay. We are increasing our awareness and reactions to be on the front foot. We are working closely with the federal government and other ag ministers, though we have not had a national ministers hook-up yet.

Mr BURGOYNE: Who is coordinating the response to lumpy skin disease across Northern Australia?

Mr MALEY: Is the level 3 lab operating?

Mr DRABSCH: Yes, it was opened last year by Minister Manison.

The coordination of the response is led by the Chief Veterinary Officer. She travelled to Indonesia with Luke. Should an outbreak occur, she has statutory emergency powers to set up and lead an emergency operation centre similar to those set up by Commissioner Chalker for the COVID outbreak.

Mr BURGOYNE: Would these statutory powers extend to Western Australia and Queensland?

Mr KIRBY: We have good relationships with our counterparts and ministers in those states.

Mr BOWEN: We have an Australian Chief Veterinary Officer, Dr Mark Schipp, and a deputy based in Cairns. At the national level, they take command for a major animal disease outbreak. They are involved with managing Japanese encephalitis, along with national Health. Our Chief Veterinary Officer and Chief Health Officer manage it locally. The same happens with national plant, insect and environmental incursions. It is a nationally coordinated exercise.

Mr BURGOYNE: When I was briefed by Ms Fitzpatrick recently, I asked who was heading up the response to lumpy skin disease. Rightly so, we have been told today, that it is Ms Fitzpatrick. I asked who was heading up the response with regard to foot-and-mouth disease. Originally, these issues were not raised when I had that briefing. It is my understanding that Ms Fitzpatrick is basically responsible for our response in regard to all the risks we face, whether it be foot-and-mouth disease, lumpy skin disease or Japanese encephalitis. It is a huge amount of work. I was blown away at the capability and how much Sue Fitzpatrick has to look after.

My only ask of the government is that surely we can support our chief vet in her role to ensure that should one of these incursions occur we are in the best possible place to respond to it. My understanding is that we have one team working exceptionally hard to deal with all the possible threats we face in the Northern Territory and across northern Australia.

Mr KIRBY: I assure you that our Chief Veterinary Officer will get every support. You need to understand the complexities of what would happen if there was an outbreak. We will do as much as we can proactively, but the best similarity I can give you is what has happened with COVID and the need to stand up emergency operation centres.

COVID was a good example. Live exporters were still able to go to other countries and drop animals off. Through the regulations and stipulations that were put in place, we did not have incursions from those vessels travelling overseas. That was not just because of the Chief Health Officer, it was because all the industry got behind them. The industry will be doing all it can to help out and assist the Chief Veterinary Officer.

Mr DRABSCH: That is precisely the reason we created a new deputy veterinary officer position—to provide that support for Sue Fitzpatrick in a direct, day-to-day sense. She receives the support of Luke, me, Phil Hausler and Lorraine Corowa across the organisation. This is a priority. We are actively planning scenarios where we might need to escalate and ensuring we have the resources to do it effectively.

Mr BURGOYNE: Has the role of the deputy been filled?

Mr DRABSCH: Not as yet, no.

Mr BURGOYNE: How long has it been advertised?

Mr DRABSCH: We have only just got it through the budget. It is for this forthcoming financial year.

Mr BURGOYNE: Have you met with the Northern Territory's chief vet, Sue Fitzpatrick?

Mr KIRBY: I have not met with Ms Fitzpatrick in the couple of weeks since I was lucky enough to get this portfolio back. I must explain to people listening and counterparts in the department what a pleasure it is. I enjoyed my time in the ag space when I had the opportunity to work there previously.

I was the Primary Industry minister when COVID hit and saw how industry got behind people up and down the track to make sure we could still have animals, feed and food for humans; and that our important live trade continued, even overseas. It was an amazing reaction from everybody involved in the ag space. I look forward to working with them closely again.

Mr BURGOYNE: You are taking this risk seriously but have not thought it prudent to meet with Northern Territory's chief vet since taking over the role of Agriculture minister?

Mr KIRBY: As a minister you get the opportunity to meet with a range of people. I have had conversations with many stakeholders across the sector and CEOs of different organisations, including the Cattlemen's Association and the Farmers' Federation. I have full confidence in the senior department people and my office to maintain strong relationships with them. We will continue to do so as required.

Mr BURGOYNE: Will your government be calling for the destruction of banana plants in the Top End as a result of the latest banana freckle outbreak?

Mr KIRBY: We have done a massive body of work over recent years to eradicate banana freckle from the Northern Territory. We have recently become aware of another incursion. We are monitoring it closely and working with the affected business to track as many plants as possible.

Through the previous episode we learned a lot about dealing with different farmers, people and private entities with issues regarding somebody entering their property. There is a range of ways properties can be scoped, access given and inspections done. It is an important matter. For the majority of people over the previous issues, whether it was citrus canker or banana freckle—the two more broadly associated incursions. When people had to go onto to properties and remove plants we did the best we could to replace them and offer options. There will be a range of options available.

Mr BOWEN: The determination regarding removal of plans has not been made. Seven properties have been identified in the Batchelor region as infected. Those properties had plant movement restrictions placed on them. A determination regarding the strategy for eradication has not yet been agreed to by the Commonwealth Government.

Under our national deed with industry and governments—all jurisdictions in the Commonwealth—we have to put together an eradication plan, which is sent through to the national committee for approval. That process is under way. We are fairly optimistic about a six-month program.

Mr BURGOYNE: Of the seven properties in Batchelor are any major growers or commercial players affected?

Mr BOWEN: There is one classified as commercial.

Mr BURGOYNE: What will the latest outbreak response be from the Northern Territory Government?

Mr KIRBY: Mr Bowen just laid it out, down to the detail of whether we need to eradicate plants. We had eradicated banana freckle. Given that they are on top of exactly the number of affected properties, there is detailed knowledge of how far this has spread.

Mr BURGOYNE: Has the department looked at what an eradication program could cost the Northern Territory Government?

Mr KIRBY: Being a recent incursion, we will not be in a position to detail exact costs for this outbreak yet. A range of proactive measures were put in place. When we have outbreaks, staff or contractors are allocated to the work. With citrus canker we brought in contractors. I remember sitting here years ago answering why the ag allocation of full-time employees was over what we were supposed to have, which was due to bringing people in for citrus canker.

A large number of the people will already be Northern Territory employees. If it is the cost of replacing individual allocations of plants it may not be massive, but if it goes into commercial arrangements it will be a different matter to work through.

Mr BOWEN: We are optimistic that this may be contained in the Batchelor region. A lot of our core capability is engaged in surveillance work. The laboratories and field staff are doing active surveillance and have looked at 60 other properties outside of the Batchelor area to assess if the disease is there. They are undertaking contact tracing and assessing sentinel plants for signs of disease across the Top End.

If we need to surge to cater for an eradication program, that is when the national agreement comes into play. Australian jurisdictions, through agriculture, have a sophisticated way of dealing with these sorts of things nationally and cost-sharing with industry. If it is agreed to nationally we will respond. The budget at this point in time is reasonably modest compared to the old eradication program, which was expensive. All other jurisdictions have a keen interest in us eradicating it. Hopefully, that will be approved soon and we will be able to surge in the way that the plan outlines.

Mr BURGOYNE: I am interested in who makes the call. Minister, is it you who makes the call to eradicate plants contained in the Batchelor area, or is that call made federally?

Mr BOWEN: It is a national call. The national management group, which I am a member of—which is all the jurisdictions and the Commonwealth—ultimately makes a call with technical advice from our Chief Plant Health Officer and her equivalents in other jurisdictions.

The decision is made at the national level as to whether or not it can be eradicated. If it cannot be eradicated and the decision is made they use the term 'transition to management'. That is not recoverable from the national agreements; it would be our responsibility. If nationally it is agreed it can be eradicated that kicks in under a cost-sharing arrangement paid for by the Commonwealth Government, industry and other jurisdictions. It is proportional, based on population.

Mr BURGOYNE: If an organic farm was caught up in this would they be able to seek compensation through the government so they could remove their own plants without using pesticides like glyphosate?

Mr BOWEN: If a decision was made that it could be eradicated, the techniques for that eradication program would be determined as part of the plan. I could not tell you exactly what techniques would be used but it has to be agreed at the national level by technical experts who say, 'This is how it needs to be done. This is the probability of it working. Are we prepared to commit the funds to make it happen?'

Ms BOOTHBY: You mentioned Aboriginal business enterprises in the NT and government contracts estimated at \$15,000 and higher. On Tuesday 31 May you announced that the government was implementing a new procurement policy to award 5% of all government contracts to Aboriginal-owned businesses in the 2022–23 financial year. You were quoted saying it will 'increase equitable access to procurement activities for Aboriginal business enterprises in the NT and will apply to all government contracts estimated at \$15,000 or higher'. Given that records show the figure already sits at 4.997%, why announce a policy you are already achieving?

Mr KIRBY: It is not a complex area. There are major funding allocations and contracts in those areas. We are proud of the body of work we have done. Some details within that body of work are nation-leading, recognising Aboriginal-owned business enterprises. Everybody in the room would acknowledge that if we have the capacity for Aboriginal businesses to operate in these spaces, they are better at employing Aboriginal people. It is a sharp focus of this government.

There were remarkably large contracts tendered out this year, skewed by multi-year release of remote housing tenancy and maintenance contracts. We wanted to aim at an achievable level and make sure the foundation of the policy would stand up—there is no need to go back over the programs and policies put together to achieve this outcome that have not done it. Some were abused, for want of a better term. We wanted to make sure we had the foundation of the policy right, to set achievable targets so we could gently step forward. The Chamber of Commerce came on board and said this is a wonderful initiative. IBN support what we are doing.

Inclusion of the multi-year release of remote housing tenancy and maintenance contracts means that the data will skew. Over a broader period of time, 5% will be the target. It will just be a short-term target. We will be aiming to increase it in the future. We did not want to go out with a 15% target and have the broader business community concerned about opportunities. We felt that a 5% target was achievable. Today's data might look like we have already over-achieved but that is not the case.

Mr DRABSCH: We have been working on the development of the Aboriginal procurement policy for some time. An important element it is an increase in the proportion of Aboriginal ownership in the definition of an Aboriginal enterprise, which currently sits at 50:50. It will be 51%, which reflects the Closing the Gap national agreement. There are a number of business that comply with a 50:50 level, in the construction area for example, which will not necessarily meet that threshold. There is a transitional arrangement to allow them to adjust their ownership structures to be recognised and receive preference under our Value for Territory assessment framework.

The point the minister made about the lumpiness of the housing program and how it affects the stats this year is that we do not want to go below the targets. We want to exceed it. Ultimately, as the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs suggested, she would like to get to a much higher level, which reflects the proportion of Aboriginality in our population.

It is important that it is out there. We have agreement with the business community and the Northern Territory Indigenous Business Network. There will be data and processes for registration of businesses under the NTIBN, which will assist procurement officers to recognise Aboriginal enterprises as they go through procurement processes. It is a comprehensive program and, importantly, it is not just about setting targets and hoping. A lot of this is building the capability of Aboriginal enterprises. That is why we have an Aboriginal economic participation framework, which has been developed through the Aboriginal Affairs office regarding skills of local Aboriginal workers and enterprises. My department and the business enterprise development area will direct their programs to assist businesses to develop the capability to take advantage of these opportunities.

Ms BOOTHBY: We are sitting at the 4.997%. Without the lumpy housing contracts that number would be different. Do we know what that rate would be without the lumpy housing contracts?

Mr DRABSCH: I recall that it was about 3.5%. It is at an early stage of the implementation of policy as it was only released in the last few weeks. The key thing is to bed down the policy, look at the targets over the forthcoming financial year and see how we track against them.

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

No questions.

OUTPUT GROUP 1.0 – AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND BIOSECURITY

Output 1.1 – Agriculture

Mr BURGOYNE: The 2022–23 budget has approximately \$17m allocated to this output, which is a decrease of approximately \$4m from last year. Why has the budget been cut by \$4m?

Mr KIRBY: There are a range of complexities within the funding model. It is important we have exact detail to explain where the funding nuances come from.

Mr DRABSCH: The 2021–22 revised budget estimate was inflated from additional revenue from the sale of livestock and produce, for example the good prices we have had, and inclusion of externally funded project revenue adjustments. They have fallen out as we go into the 2022–23 year. Other unsourced revenues have also fallen out. That has been offset by additional funding of \$500,000 to create advancement in factory industry in the food processing area. There is carry over from 2021–22 into 2022–23 of approximately \$0.5m, which nets out to the change. An important point is that the budget this year is similar to the original budget of 2021–2022. One-off issues which pop up explain it.

Mr BURGOYNE: What is the estimated number of cattle in the Northern Territory and how does this compare with previous years?

Mr BOWEN: The Territory does not require producers to lodge returns. Numbers on the cattle run in the Territory is not an exact science. We rely upon numbers of cattle that move interstate and internationally, and judgments made by our scientists, extension officers and those working with industry.

The current estimate nationally is 2.1 million from statistics from Meat & Livestock Australia, which manages the levy system with all the transactions for livestock that change hands from producer to producer, and to processors and the like.

Mr BURGOYNE: How does that compare with previous years?

Mr BOWEN: We had a particularly dry period two years ago on the Barkly Tableland and significant numbers of cattle were destocked across the Barkly. Some of the same dynamics are working through the Victoria River District and the Barkly this year as well. The Wet Season was not as good as we would have liked. Cattle moving inside the Territory and interstate.

There was not much feed anywhere in the country; this was part of a national drought. Fortunately, there is more grass around than there was in the drought two years ago. The good news is that we have much more favourable conditions in southern parts of the Territory and in interstate locations for cattle to be moved and put onto pasture.

A lot of the cattle on the Barkly and the Victoria River District are run by larger corporate holdings. It is normal practice for them to move livestock around depending on what the conditions are across their properties, whether they be in Western Australia, the Northern Territory, South Australia or Queensland.

Mr BURGOYNE: The TERC advocated for the utilisation of a sustainable development precinct model to attract agriculture investment, with particular attention paid to the Douglas Daly, Katherine and western Davenport Ranges areas. What work is being done to coordinate agriculture investment in these areas?

Mr KIRBY: Ag investment and growing ag opportunities in the Northern Territory is a focus of the government. Dealing with our pastoral estate creates a level of detailed negotiations, complexities and, at times, concern. We have to step through it. We would all be aware of concerns regarding water use when any ag or industry ventures move into a new space. All of those things need to be taken into account.

We have target areas. When I was previously the agriculture minister, Mr Hausler may have accompanied me on a trip to Kununurra to look at the opportunities of expansion onto the Northern Territory side of the border and how the Ord operations are run. An amazing opportunity presents there.

Mr BOWEN: It is a strong focus for the Northern Territory Government. There are three land releases that a lot of people would be familiar with. One is Keep Plains near the Western Australian border, an area of about 67,000 hectares of which about 8,000 hectares are suitable for potential agriculture development. The second parcel is at Larrimah, which is also owned by the Northern Territory Land Corporation. There is also country in the Wildman River area to the east of Darwin. Those three land releases have been a focus. The role our department plays is helping to facilitate development opportunities and agreements.

We see them as critical to increasing the value of production out of the Territory. About 100,000 hectares of land is developed for agriculture in the Northern Territory, which is less than 1%—there is less than 1% of the Territory developed for any purpose, urban or agricultural. To increase our production, which is the ambition through the TERC process to \$40bn by 2030—our share of that is \$2b—we need to encourage the development of more land, potentially up to 50,000 hectares over the next 10 to 15 years.

Mr HAUSLER: We have been working with the NT Land Corporation to release the three parcels of land. A preferred developer, an investment group, has been appointed for the Keep Plain. There are ongoing negotiations for the preferred developer for Wildman and Larrimah. There has been work done to identify future development areas, such as the Gunn Point horticulture precinct, which recently got infrastructure funding from the Northern Territory and Commonwealth governments to develop two or three parcels for horticulture. There is also work being done to identify opportunities for irrigation at the proposed AROWS facility, Douglas Daly, Elliot and Western Davenport.

Mr BURGOYNE: What has the Northern Territory Government done to assist the proponents of the Singleton horticultural project to progress their investments in the Barkly?

Mr KIRBY: There are complexities around all the ag investments in the Northern Territory and growing those opportunities. I look forward to getting down the track to Alice Springs for the Show and will try to get off the Stuart Highway between Alice Springs and Tennant Creek show to meet with operators.

Mr DRABSCH: This important project presents the opportunity to transform agricultural development in Central Australia and underpin transport and other services to support growth. The project is being supported by the Major Projects Commissioner, as a major project, and we have been working in that area in pursuit of it. There was a decision by the Water Controller to allocate water, which is the subject of dispute, but the quantity that sits in that aquifer—138,000 gigalitres—is a more than adequate supply to allow a 40-gigalitre drawn down. This equates to an annual average of less than 40% of an annual recharge of that aquifer. We are confident that the Water Controller made the right scientific decision, which will ultimately be determined through the appeal processes. In the meantime, we are working with FortuneAgri to ensure all other mechanisms are in place to facilitate the development of this important project.

Mr BURGOYNE: The Major Projects Commissioner is assisting. Has Singleton horticulture project been given major project status?

Mr DRABSCH: Yes, that was my understanding.

Mr KIRBY: They applied and have been considered. We met with representatives of Fortune recently. They know that the Northern Territory Government is keen to support them. I will seek to catch up with the Major Projects Commissioner shortly to see how that is progressing.

Mr DRABSCH: I apologise if there was any confusion about its status. When I was in DTBI, I had responsibility for major projects, but did not have responsibility for agriculture—I was dealing with the project then. We have always taken the approach that it is a major project, which we would like to facilitate.

Mr BURGOYNE: I would love to see the Singleton horticulture project given major project status because I think that it will be, as you said, an important project into the future.

Mr DEPUTY CHAIR: On that note, we will have a 10-minute break.

The committee suspended.

Mr BURGOYNE: When can we expect to see the Katherine agribusiness hub up and running?

Mr KIRBY: That is being led by DIPL. The cotton gin will be an anchor tenant and industry has opted to make sure the gin gets off the ground. It is progressing and we are helping to work it out. We have committed to build headworks and help out but there are complexities regarding the land arrangements. I cannot give you any detail about where it is up to.

To fill out on the Singleton question from before, I spoke to Mr Bowen about the opportunities it will present, not only down the track but through trials already being done. It is a massive project of tens of millions of dollars, and the opportunity for hundreds of ongoing workers and produce for local, interstate and overseas markets.

Mr BOWEN: A number of things are within our control. We have been excited about the opportunities in that region and with the Singleton development itself. We have discussed the complexities around it. Under an agreement with the owners of Singleton Station we are running trials with different varieties to prepare for when development starts to accelerate so they have varieties that are acclimatised to the region. There is work being done with citrus, grapes and jujubes, which is a Southeast Asian fruit.

We have a new position in horticulture in Central Australia, which has been filled. We acknowledged the need for specialist skills in the Central Australian region and put an additional resource there who, in addition to other staff based in other parts of the Territory, will be working with the Singleton proponents on the trials.

Ali Curung has a fairly large planting in the mango planting trial, and other varieties including agave and new crops species are being trialed in the region. The Singleton trial area is about five to six hectares.

Mr BURGOYNE: Will that horticultural role be based out of AZRI?

Mr BOWEN: Yes.

Output 1.2 – Fisheries

Mr YAN: The first question to the minister should be, where is the million dollar fish? We are in estimates and you have to tell the truth.

Mr KIRBY: The truth is, I do not know. It is a wonderful initiative. The people who sponsor the program have been banking on giving the money away over the last few years. They have done a number of \$10,000 fish. I cannot tell you the exact location of the million dollar fish. Over the next year or two, I am extremely eager to give \$1m away to a keen, hopefully Northern Territorian fisho to change their life forever.

Rec fishing is an amazing industry. I spoke to the rec fishing outlets around town about how they fared during COVID and a lot of people went back to their roots during that time and either found for the first time or reinvigorated their love for fishing. We see hundreds of people down the Daly over the weekends.

Mr YAN: In the 2022–23 budget, approximately \$13m is allocated to the output. This is a decrease of \$7m from last year. Can you explain why the budget is being cut?

Mr KIRBY: There are peculiarities in how assets are not written off and how they work their way through the budget figures. It relies on programs we have put together on assets we have built and deployed. To have capacity through the \$50m fund to invest in programs like out at Point Stuart or a rec fishing competition—a couple of local members often turn up to different fishing events. The Buddy Boats Day at the Palmerston Game Fishing club—they do an amazing job looking after kids who would not traditionally get the chance to go out on boats. The looks on the kids' faces are remarkable. We are more than happy to invest in the rec fishing industry and continue working our way through those programs.

Mr DRABSCH: You are correct in saying that the Fisheries output in the 2022–23 budget is \$13m, which is down about \$7m from the 2021–22 revised budget. That shrouds an increase in our aquaculture program and an investment of \$1.4m made into the Darwin Aquaculture Centre. Assets have been written off; that is a paper adjustment. Artificial reefs have been written off to the value of \$7.7m and the Gove boat ramp was written off for about \$289,000. That is about \$8m of asset write-offs. Spending happened in the previous budget which has now fallen out. There are substantial increases in our aquaculture investment, with the research activity going on, and in biosecurity.

Mr YAN: I understand the write-off of those assets. Rec fishing is welcome at the boat ramps and the artificial reefs. What will the \$1.4m investment into aquaculture look like?

Mr CURNOW: The Fisheries division welcomes the new \$1.4m investment and planning is under way for it. There are two elements to the new money. One is to make improvements at the Darwin Aquaculture Centre. Members may know that centre is not just home to the research and development areas that are currently doing work on black jewfish and blacklip rock oyster projects. The intent of those projects is to replicate what we previously did with barramundi. The work done by the centre in the early 1980s and 1990s—it now has the nursery and production protocols used around the world in barramundi facilities.

That is what we are trying to replicate through the oyster and black jewfish work, to commercialise the opportunities so the industry can take them on. We saw the success of Humpty Doo Barramundi, which is leasing space at the centre and doing its own nursery production runs. That is the similar model we want to follow, building on the oyster and black jewfish work.

The other element we are keen to look at is the innovation space, not just in aquaculture. That might be automated monitoring of feeds and water quality to take a lot of the manual processing out and get a lot more real-time data to assist industries to make sure water quality and anything that could cause production issues is picked up. It is also to look at monitoring fisheries and harvesting methods in commercial fisheries. We will be keen to use some of that money to partner with the federal government, CRCs and bodies like that to bring innovation and make the Northern Territory early adapters of technology.

Mr YAN: What is the status of the studies into the commercialisation of rock oysters and jewfish?

Mr CURNOW: The blacklip oyster is the most advanced at this stage. The work to date has been about nailing the production side of things. As of late last year we had two successful runs of over 500,000 spat each, so one million spat produced. The spat were put onto South Goulburn Island and batches are being run for Groote Eylandt to do the field grow-outs of oysters. From limited runs in the early years of success when we were getting 20,000 or 30,000 rather than 500,000 spat, oysters were already put out on South Goulburn Island. We now have mature oysters ready for harvest. Unfortunately with COVID and things like that the community were not ready to harvest at the time.

The other key element of the work that picks up on the answer to the previous question, about the new money, is that we will be looking to invest in quality assurance programs for oysters. Making sure those things are nailed is an important part of the supply chain. That will be the focus in the coming years as well as continuing to refine the production working oysters and grow-outs, and looking at marketing and quality assurance.

The black jewfish work is in its early stages. This new money will allow us to invest in a bigger stage and put in more ponds and tanks to try to nail the production cycle. To date we have only had one or two successful spawnings of the jewfish. We have that part covered, but they are being cannibalistic, chewing on each other and losing a lot of fins. We are doing work on how we can minimise that behaviour and make sure we get a greater number through to survival.

I am not sure of the exact number, but we grew out a few to a bigger size that have been put into the ponds at Humpty Doo Barramundi. We are doing commercial grow-out trials to gauge their growth rates in ponds compared to in the wild and, importantly, to look at whether we still end up with the same value in swim bladders in a pond-based environment as in a wild fish. It is early days, but this new money will be used to research those to a greater degree and hopefully commercialise the opportunities.

Mr YAN: What are your time frames from spat to harvest for the blacklip oysters?

Mr CURNOW: It is about an 18-month cycle. That part is working well. The key is getting a full commercial-sized production run of spat that we can put out. We have extended the trial sites at South Goulburn Island through partnership with the CRC. The Groote ones are in the early stages but we are hoping in the next year or two, once we have nailed all the elements, we will be able to expand the project across communities across the Top End.

Mr YAN: Did the government recommit \$10m to fund the establishment and support of an Aboriginal fishing body?

Mr KIRBY: That is correct. I do not want to pre-empt where these questions are going, but any of the Blue Mud Bay-type queries will sit with the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Minister Uibo. That money was committed prior to the previous election; the commitment will stand.

Mr YAN: As far as rec fishing goes, has there been anything added to that commitment?

Mr KIRBY: Not that I am aware of, to that commitment. You would need to ask Minister Uibo about any nuances within that funding envelope.

Mr YAN: Budget 2022–23 has committed \$1.29m towards expanding and diversifying the Darwin Aquaculture Centre as a centre for excellence in tropical aquaculture, research and development, and for the creation of a fisheries and aquaculture innovation hub to identify innovations in harvesting and production technologies. What will we see for this \$1.29m investment? Is it different to the \$1.4m you have spoken about, or is that the same money?

Mr KIRBY: Mr Curnow outlined the operations that happen at the aquaculture centre in reasonable detail. There have been a number of commercial operations; some still operate there and others have transitioned out and stand on their own. Mr Curnow detailed how the oysters are progressing. That is what the money will be used for.

The complexities around the oyster programs—hats off to the people there. The last time I visited was a number of years ago. They are keen on what they do. We did a trial through the barra farm to see if the oysters might survive in one of the ponds for a period of time but it was about as minute, as a decent deluge of rain changed the consistency of the water and, unfortunately, they did not survive. That is the type of program the funding will go into.

Mr CURNOW: The oysters and jewfish are examples of two species that we have. With this funding commitment we will be sitting down with industry to work out other species they may be interested in. We have an aquaculture committee with the key players and outside interests with researchers. We will look at what other species industry might be interested in, and how we can leverage the money with Commonwealth programs.

Mr YAN: Has industry already indicated what other species it may be considering as far as aquaculture goes for your centre and for the Territory?

Mr CURNOW: Not in terms of new ones we have not looked at yet. We already have three commercial tenants at the centre doing their own research. Tasmanian Seafoods is doing a lot of research into trepang farming. They are producing sluglets to stock in embayments or ponds. That work is under way.

In the past, Monsoon Aquatics has been at the centre. It is historically a wild harvest collector of corals, clams and fish. Given the environmental constraints imposed by the federal government on the take of those species, it has been increasingly moving into the aquaculture space. There has been media on that recently. It has been successful in expanding its business through the use of aquaculture.

Paspaley are the other tenants. It does a lot of pearl oyster breeding and its genetic program is based at the aquaculture centre. We are open to any new interests from industry about what that might entail.

Mr YAN: Budget 2022–23 has allocated \$8m towards the establishment of an Aboriginal sea company. Is this a grant to a private entity or will the company be an NTG-owned business?

Mr KIRBY: That would be under the overarching Blue Mud Bay commitment. Part of that deal was to set up the fund and assist Aboriginal businesses. The technicalities of that would be best asked of Minister Uibo.

Mr BURGOYNE: Has the department of Fisheries done any work that looks into how much it would cost the Northern Territory Government to buy back commercial barramundi licences?

Mr KIRBY: Barramundi licences and commercial fishing across the Territory is an interesting space that brings a lot to the Northern Territory. For many years there has been family-owned, small businesses, businesspeople, operators or bigger operators that have operated professionally in those spaces. I mentioned the rec fishing industry in my earlier remarks and what that brings to the Northern Territory.

The commercial barramundi fishing sector has gone through significant change in the last few years. Commercially, if a proponent wishes to come into that market in the Northern Territory they are within their

rights to do so. A particular interest has bought a number of barramundi licences. There are a lot of lessons to learn from the way different entities, governments and fisheries operate around the nation. We can use the snapper fishing industry in South Australia as a good example. They identified a concern some time out from when they had to shut the fishery down. In that time they did studies but they were not quick enough to act.

In previous discussions I have had with fisheries, and more recently since I have had the portfolio back, a focus in the commercial industry is to make sure that all the fisheries are operating as they should and that there are abundant catches to make sure there is capacity for individual fisheries to be sustainable.

Through different Blue Mud Bay discussions we have had—whether it be an Aboriginal enterprise that may wish to enter into the barramundi fishing industry, all those cards can be put on the table. As far as the Northern Territory Government purchasing barramundi licences, unless anything has changed recently that has not been raised with me.

Mr BURGOYNE: Are there any plans to buy back commercial barramundi licences?

Mr KIRBY: No.

Mr YAN: A company from interstate has purchased a number of NT commercial barramundi licences. This has changed the way barramundi netting is taking place in Northern Territory coastal waters. With the number of licences comes a meterage of nets, which are being used with the assistance of a mothership, which allows them to harvest and produce en masse in various areas at once. Are there any concerns from your department regarding how this harvesting and netting method may affect fisheries stock of barramundi, threadfin salmon and the bycatch of sawfish in the future?

Mr KIRBY: With one professional proponent picking up a number of licenses there are complexities. I think you are alluding to the capacity for different boats to stay in an area for a significant amount of time, whereas some areas were managed through people operating there only for certain periods of time in years gone by.

In many different industries across the Northern Territory, people are having to come up to speed with different rules and regulations. This is what I was alluding to before, that in learning from mistakes made in fisheries in other parts of the nation we have made improvements in operations, such as thorough tracking of vessels. We have had a keen eye. It has progressed a long way in the last few years. I have heard similar concerns to what you are airing, about over fishing.

Mr CURNOW: There is a review of barramundi fisheries under way. We established a management advisory committee with representatives from commercial and recreational fishers, Aboriginal interests and conservation interests. All the parties are sitting in that room. There have been three meetings to date and the process was predicated by an ecological risk assessment run by a panel of independent experts last year. The risk assessment was then run back through the stakeholder group to truth those things. There are concerns over gillnet fisheries with threatened and endangered species—that is one of the critical things needed to keep the fisheries profile going forward.

The review will work through those issue but a lot of the perceptions put forward by people about the purchases of licences by one company and changes in fishing practices—we have not seen any real changes in overall catch. There have been changes in operation and areas that have not been as heavily fished in the past, which is probably driving some of those perceptions.

The barramundi fisheries, in a biological sense, is highly underutilised. It is only being fished at 3 to 5% by mass overall, which for fisheries is nothing. The drive in fisheries is more in social conflict with traditional owners and recreational fishers. The real challenge of this review will be to nail those aspects. The timeliness of the review is important—with Blue Mud Bay issues and the importance of recreational fishing in the Northern Territory.

The barramundi fishery is operating under a 30-plus year management plan. There has never been concerted efforts to have clear objectives and goals to work out what we are managing. Unlike the last 30 years, where there were periodic buy backs that were lobbied for by stakeholder groups rather than done in a planned and coordinated fashion, this review gives us the opportunity to be clear about what we want out of the barramundi fisheries across all user groups, how it might operate and what areas operation different groups may need priority in. There is a fair way to go in that process but hopefully by this time next year it will be well advanced to the pathway of having a public discussion paper ready to go out.

Mr YAN: As a part of commercial fisheries operation in the Northern Territory waters there has been discussion for the ability for observation. I do not know if we have had observers on commercial boats on occasion. As part of this review will there be any will from government to increase observers on commercial boats to look at fishing practices, particularly regarding endangered species?

Mr KIRBY: Digitally, things progress quickly in the capacity to do different monitoring, not in traditional ways. Every industry will continue to take leaps and bounds into the new ages.

Mr CURNOW: In recent years, all vessels in the barramundi fleet have been put under a satellite-based monitoring system. All the dories must have separate VMS units fitted so that, from our office, we can see where the fleet is operating. This helps us enforces things such as closure lines, have an understanding of where fishing activities are taking place and the ability to truth the logbook data that commercial fishermen provide.

One of the benefits of having the new operator in the fishery is that he brought in larger vessels and the opportunity to put observers on board is back. When I came here 13 or 14 years ago a lot of the older vessels were not conducive to putting government staff on as observers—there were work health and safety risks associated with that. Those opportunities sit in the new investment in fisheries.

The other thing we are trialling in our fisheries is electronic monitoring—the use of cameras and things like that and the role they can play, rather than having physical observers on boats. We can have cameras set up to either film constantly or when fishing gear is activated—it is harder in smaller vessels. We are looking at it now but improvements and technology mean having small camera systems fitted to dories is realistic.

Mr YAN: In December 2019, AFANT received \$100,000 in grant funding from the recreational fishing grant scheme to contract an access route through Manbulloo Station to a spot in Katherine known as 50K Hole. Negotiations with landowners are progressing. When will this new access route be constructed and the grant funds paid?

Mr KIRBY: Access for people in the Katherine region is important to us and to people who are not from the Northern Territory. Katherine is an interesting spot for fishing, as big an industry as it is. We want to do all we can. We have had to work closely with Defence and other bodies to give people who live in the Katherine region decent access. It was a commitment to open up access through Manbulloo. There were complexities and even a change of ownership of the property. I am not 100% sure whether we have any more information on that, but we would love to be able to secure it for people.

Mr CURNOW: There was a change in ownership of the property which affected the negotiations between AFANT and the property owner. Last I heard, those negotiations were continuing. The project was not finished per se but we are waiting on an update before proceeding with the full grant funding. It is still in abeyance subject to negotiations.

Mr YAN: Can I take that question on notice?

Question on Notice No 7.4

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

Mr YAN: Could you provide an update on the access through Manbulloo Station on the Katherine River to the 50k hole?

Mr DEPUTY CHAIR: Minister, do you accept the question?

Mr KIRBY: Yes.

Mr DEPUTY CHAIR: The question asked by the Member for Namatjira has been allocated number 7.4.

Mr YAN: Of the \$100,000 in grant funding, how much is left?

Mr KIRBY: We may not have that exact detail. We can include that into the response to the question we have just agreed to take.

Question on Notice No 7.5

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

Mr YAN: Of the grant funding provided to AFANT, how much is left?

Mr DEPUTY CHAIR: Minister, do you accept the question?

Mr KIRBY: Yes.

Mr DEPUTY CHAIR: The question asked by the Member for Namatjira has been allocated number 7.5.

Mr YAN: The budget has allocated \$27m in major works to enhance rec fishing infrastructure across the Territory. How will this budget be spent and will it be spent during the 2022–23 period?

Mr KIRBY: We have a range of programs on the go. We had to do a survey of the Dundee boat ramp. I believe the tender for that will go out in the next week or two. It has funding allocated.

We called for expressions of interest last year for the Daly River carpark and ablution block and did not get anyone. That has been picked up now so we can do that body of work and get the ablution block, boat ramp and carpark facilities tidied up. The depth of the river recently created issues for people in getting their boats down the boat ramp. We will look at how that contract was drawn up and if there is anything we can do.

As far as other projects for the rec fishing allocation, are working our way through Point Stuart. There were a range of thought processes for that road. We needed to secure access to the road and an easement to make sure we could get people in there because significant culverts and creeks impeded people's access to the road. We worked closely with our rec fishers' committee to understand what they were after. They were not after a gold-plated road.

There were different concerns people had raised that said, 'You are going to waste a lot of money on a road and we will still not be able to access the boat ramp at the end of it'. We have done the best job we can in consulting with people, securing the easement, making sure there is access in critical areas that stopped people from getting through the road and access to the boat ramp. It will be fixed in this initial stage.

You have to be a reasonably keen fisho to make that trip. People will enjoy the access when the road is completed.

Mr CURNOW: The Point Stuart work will hopefully be finished this Dry Season. It is well advanced. The road is in quite good condition.

Dundee will be going out for tender shortly; that is some of the committed money. The Daly project contract mentioned in the opening statement, which is \$4.35m, has been issued. Work will start late in the Dry Season to minimise the impact on fishing and use of the ramp during the peak season.

Out of that money is another \$1m for two more years of the recreational grants program, at \$500,000 per year. There will be another call for those grants this year, on the back of the ones the minister awarded in December last year.

The other key project in the early planning stages is the potential for a land-based fishing platform in Darwin. The minister has been in consultation with the council regarding a potential platform at East Point. That needs to go through a range of environmental and community group interests, but it is being actively explored.

Mr KIRBY: The Dundee project will have complexities regarding timing as it is a busy time of year. There are other major renovations at the local hotel. We will work to cause the least amount of interference. I thank everyone who worked to ensure the sand and silt was removed, to keep the ramp operational.

Mr YAN: Twenty-seven kilometres of the road to Gunn Point has been sealed and DIPL has no plans to do more. Minister Lawler referred the Member for Nelson to Fisheries to speak about sealing the last 16 kilometres as part of \$27m in major works. Does Fisheries have plans to do work on the final 16 kilometres of road?

Mr KIRBY: Gunn Point road is important. It is good that an amount of it has been bituminised. There will be a range of opportunities there in the future, which may be ag or other propositions in the precinct. In years to come everyone will be glad. We have not had discussions within Fisheries to allocate funding to bituminise the rest of that road. It is a beautiful site and a lot of people use it. As the urban sprawl continues and people head to Howard Springs and Humpty Doo the pressure on the roads and ramps will increase.

Mr CURNOW: The priority setting advice for comes through the Recreational Fishing Advisory Committee. They have already notionally expended their \$50m a few times over against lists of priority projects, but that is not one of them.

Mr KIRBY: We do not necessarily dictate that any one thing—such as the Point Stuart Road—is the most important thing. There is a range of projects. We take advice from the body of experts who sit on the committee. They highlighted a number of years ago that they wanted Point Stuart to be completed—and I mentioned earlier about the negotiations that went on—but I have not heard anything from that committee about it since.

Mr YAN: I just found it interesting that Minister Lawler threw Fisheries under the bus for the last 16 kilometres. It seems a shame that it is the last 27 kilometres and not the first 16. Rec fishers can live in hope.

Output 1.3 – Biosecurity and Animal Welfare

Mr BURGOYNE: How many staff does the Northern Territory Chief Veterinary Officer have at her disposal?

Ms COROWA: The Chief Veterinary Officer has a livestock biosecurity team with about 30 staff throughout the Northern Territory. She has about six stock inspectors; we will be augmenting that. Three new stock inspectors will be employed with the new money allocated. There will also be new staff in our labs. We run the Berrimah Veterinary Laboratory under the direction of the Chief Veterinary Officer. Behind the scenes people include a meat inspector and people looking after brands and property information.

Mr BURGOYNE: The position of livestock inspector in Alice Springs was recently vacant, due to a retirement. Has that position been filled?

Ms COROWA: That position has been filled. We have a lovely young lady, Casey, in that role in Alice Springs.

Mr DEPUTY CHAIR: That concludes consideration of Output 1.3 and Output Group 1.0. Output Group 2.0 is the responsibility of another minister.

OUTPUT GROUP 3.0 – BUSINESS INNOVATION AND WORKFORCE

Output 3.1 – Business and Innovation

Ms BOOTHBY: There was a huge \$27.3m difference in last year's budget and the revised budget. Now there is a \$2.6m increase on last year's budget. What was included in the \$27.3m increase? The footnote says that it was primarily COVID business support measures. How much of that was for COVID support and what was the rest for?

Mr KIRBY: We put together our business support packages at short notice in the most trying of conditions, when people were worried about keeping their businesses afloat and their staff—who are like family—employed. A range of initiatives were put together. I commend Shaun and his team for all the work they did. There was a high level of consultation, negotiation and interaction, including meeting on a daily basis with different businesses to find out exactly how we could help.

The range of opportunities that came from knowing the detailed problems businesses were facing was amazing. Some businesses just needed assistance with people who might have been visa holders and were not entitled to local or federal support. Long-term Territory businesses that were reasonably sophisticated operations would only, at tax time, hand over a box full of receipts to their accountant. When we asked for targets to be met so people could access grants, it became difficult. People worked with small business champions and Shaun and his team. A range of packages were put together that ended up in the hundreds of millions of dollars that we put back into businesses. We are proud of what we did to assist people.

It is the good reason we now have a strong economy. Something like 400 businesses started up in the last financial year throughout the Northern Territory. I am not disregarding how tough it was and that some businesses did it tougher than others. I wanted to highlight the help this team put together and the assistance we got, particularly from the previous Chief Minister, in recognising that we had to be in front of the game.

We have had recognition from businesses, business operators who operate in the Northern Territory and interstate have said, 'We operate similar enterprises here and in a range of other states and we did not get the support in other states that we got in the Northern Territory'. Compared to the buckets of funding in other states' budgets, the Territory's money may not have been massive but it created significant outputs and investment in our economy.

Mr DRABSCH: Thank you for those generous comments, minister. I acknowledge the great leadership that you provided throughout that process and the support you provided to me and my team.

We had to process \$160m worth of funding over five different rounds of programs. As a result, we were guessing what amount of money we needed. Some programs were well taken up and others were not. We had funds left over. A lot of the increase from the 2021–22 budget to the 2021–22 revised estimate related to carry over funding from previous years. Some of that was unexpected funds. As we were evolving the programs and defining new programs, we used spare cash from the existing allocation and redirected it to emerging priorities we identified in close consultation with business and industry.

Additional funds were thrown on the table when issues arose, like the hardship support package for small businesses introduced over Christmas. There was about \$8m in business support packages. As we were heading towards the end of this financial year—or probably about halfway through it—we realised that workforce shortages would be a critical issue and again identified spare cash, which was some \$9.2m transferred into the coming budget year. Some of the carry-overs which inflated the figure last year now fall out of the budget. The relevant comparison is the original budget of 2021–22 was \$22.8m and it is now \$25.8m in the 2022–23 budget.

We are focusing on the workforce shortages but, importantly, continuing business enterprise development support. A lot of learnings were had via the pivot program, financial fitness and in administering the funds over the course of the last two years, which has helped us refine and target our programs to maximise their effectiveness and support local businesses. We kept the vast bulk of Territory businesses' heads above water through this process and ensured we had the capability to respond to the opportunities arising as we get through COVID. In the mix, the economy is strongly returning.

Ms BOOTHBY: Would you say, given what Mr Drabsch has just said, that a lot of the new funding in the next budget will not be taken up with COVID support because of the new measures you have found out of COVID? We are going forward with the business packages.

Mr KIRBY: To sit here a couple of years ago and predict what business needs would have been in 12 or 24 months' time would have been a difficult thing. Over the last year or so, workforce shortages have become apparent as people within Australia and across the globe have not been able to move around as freely as usual. There is no better example than the ag sector. Melon and mango industries rely heavily on overseas workers to get their tens of millions of dollars' worth of produce off at a particular time. They are not jobs local Territorians traditionally aspire to—some of them are hard, hot work in remote regions.

Our focus will be on getting as many workers into those positions as possible. You have heard me speak before in parliament and will continue to hear me speak about training Territorians as our first priority. We have a massive amount—and probably close to a record amount—of apprentices and trainees on at the moment. I thank Cathy for all her hard work with the RTOs. The RTOs are still advertising up and down the track. There are still opportunities for kids.

As things progress, we have to work hard. How we transfer information has changed. We have funding allocated for businesses to access if they need to go overseas. We advertise interstate and do a lot of different work with tourism seniors, whether it is overseas or interstate, so we are targeting and not doing it cold. We have a tourism campaign that links in with a worker attraction campaign.

We have \$12.8m set aside in a worker attraction campaign fund for people and businesses who need to go overseas to attract workers, particularly with the projects we have on the books for the Northern Territory. Things are starting to ramp up whether it is north of Alice Springs, through the Barkly region or up into the north of the Northern Territory.

We have opportunities and a large range of projects coming on that mean we need a workforce. A big portion of our funding, effort and energy will go into making sure we have that workforce, working closely with the Chamber of Commerce and peak bodies in the ag space to do things a bit differently. Traditionally we would have gone down to the Convention Centre or somewhere like that, put up a big trade fair and got kids to turn

up. To be honest, we did not get a lot of engagement. Businesses or peak bodies did not go to career fairs, come back to us and say, 'Look, we picked up six young lads or women that showed real interest in that'.

We continue to work on different ways to do things. We had the opportunity to speak to guys through Clontarf and girls through the Stars program to see if they knew what opportunities there are in the Northern Territory. What sorts of questions and queries, and comments—are their teachers excited about the opportunities? It is the same with youth round tables and people like that—just plugging into those areas. COVID has done a lot of bad things to us, but it has done some good things as well. We can reach more people through video conferencing, getting the explanation out. We continue to work with Cathy and her team to get the opportunities in front of people.

In conversations we had with Brendan O'Connor, our newly appointed Skills and Training minister—he is a regular visitor to the Northern Territory—and Andrew Giles, our Immigration minister, they are acutely aware of the opportunities in the Northern Territory and how workforce can hold them back. That is where a big part of our focus is.

Ms BOOTHBY: Can the department provide a full breakdown of COVID support packages, from the original commitments by program, and what was received by businesses?

Mr KIRBY: We are probably in a position to answer that in reasonable detail.

Ms BOOTHBY: I am looking for the full detail of all the programs. You mentioned a few in that statement, answering my previous question. Would it be better to do it on notice?

A witness: It is a bit long.

Question on Notice No 7.6

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

Ms BOOTHBY: Can the department provide a full breakdown of COVID support packages, from the original commitments by program, and what was received by businesses?

Mr DEPUTY CHAIR: Minister, do you accept the question?

Mr KIRBY: Yes.

Mr DEPUTY CHAIR: The question asked by the Member for Brennan has been allocated number 7.6.

Ms BOOTHBY: Do small businesses talk to you about crime? What are you doing to address their concerns? What do you tell them to demonstrate what you, as the minister for Business, are doing about the impact of their crime crisis?

Mr KIRBY: We speak to businesses on a daily basis. Depending on where we are and the time of the year will depend on whether they bring crime up or not. I am being honest with you. I understand the recent figures that have come out and the lag regarding those figures. If we meet with Darwin businesses they are probably more concerned about access to a workforce than bringing up crime issues. I guarantee that from a local member and minister for Business perspective. When we travel down the track at different times of the year it will be one of the things they bring up. It might not be the first thing businesses bring up with us. You can see the effect it has on businesses and the emotion it engenders within people.

I know from working in small business and working with small businesses that they take their business and the people they employ—they consider them family. Any attack feels like an attack on their family. We take that seriously and do everything that we can. That means working closely with the police and making sure, through Cabinet processes, that they have appropriate funding to train people to get them out to as many different centres as they can across the Territory.

We also make sure, through Cabinet processes, that Territory Families has the capacity to put in place wraparound services to keep young people or others either gainfully employed or entertained in appropriate activities—to make sure they do not feel the need to break into places or take on opportunistic crime. Over the last year or so, we had spates of crime where people were breaking into shops for food for different

reasons, when they were not able to travel or food was not in their locations. That does not make it any better for the business owner if they are broken into. We take it seriously and we put as much time and effort into it as we can.

I have seen the passion on the Member for Braitling's face when untoward incidences happen in shopping centres in Alice Springs. We will continue to work with people to make sure there is security; with police to make sure we have as many available as possible; and Territory Families and with local councils to make sure they have capacity in the Top End. We have worked with different agencies to employ private security guards for different times of the day or night to assist as well. We hear the problem about crime.

Depending on where you are and when you discuss things with people, I guarantee at the moment in the Top End it is worker shortages. Even when I go to Tennant Creek people bring up worker shortages. When you live in a smaller centre, sometimes you do not understand that the bigger centres are also struggling for workers. Delaware North, which runs the casino and major establishments in big cities in Australia and all over the world, is struggling for workers. It is everywhere. Workforce is brought up first, but crime gets brought up as well.

We sympathise with people and are happy to talk. It is not often that we go to Alice Springs or Tennant Creek and do not link up with Nicole Walsh and Greg Ireland through the Chamber of Commerce to put together a group of people to meet with. We understand there will be times when we have pretty hot conversations with people but we want to hear back. At times it is good news and weekends like the Finke when there is a lot of good will in a place like Alice Springs, but there are other times when crime is the first thing businesses bring up. We are happy for them to do that.

Ms BOOTHBY: I do not hear any confidence that you will address crime issues with small business. Sympathising with small businesses will not make them feel any safer. The Biz Secure grants do not appear in this latest budget, yet crime statistics across the Territory are at all-time highs. Why are they not in the budget?

Mr KIRBY: We have been working closely with the department and our small business champions to liaise with businesses about how we can better allocate funding through the Biz Secure packages, to help out more. We will be in a position in a week or so to announce some of the changes we have agreed to make to the Biz Secure entitlements for businesses. It is the last line of defence; there are other proactive programs.

Ms WHITE: Biz Secure is a stalwart programs for business support and growth that has been used in an effective way. The funding remains the same for next year. This year we issued nearly 600 businesses over \$3m worth of funding. We have more funding from this years' budget because of the challenges from COVID.

We undertook a review of Biz Secure with Police, Fire and Emergency Services, victims of crime, and industry to see if any aspects are no longer contemporary. We looked at the security audits and measures and updated the terms and conditions for implementation on 1 July.

The program is important for small business support, along with the other tools in our toolkit. In stage two we will work with the urban institute of design to see if we have contemporary measures. For example, rather than resecuring and shutters, do we need to think differently about it? This is one part of the crime picture, but it is important for small businesses who engage with us regularly.

Ms BOOTHBY: What is the expected number of worker shortages? In general, how many positions would the tourism and hospitality sector be looking for in the Dry Season?

Mr KIRBY: We have generic figures, but I am not sure we can drop down into explicit figures for each sector. The peak bodies from industry sectors discuss figures. For example, the hospitality industry stated they needed about 700 workers in the Top End. We did not get 700 workers straight into the industry but the Work Stay Play initiative got up around that mark.

Mr DRABSCH: It is a fluid economic environment and the challenges we faced last year have been abated to some extent by opening the borders. Backpackers are coming back to town, but there is a skill shortage across the nation and around the world. We are actively working with industry to understand where the gaps are and what skills are required, and thinking of innovative strategies for attracting workers either through training our own or bringing people from interstate or overseas.

Ms WHITE: In the TERC we were looking for an additional 35,000 workers by 2030. The modelling rom Monash and various other programs suggests that is the number we need. There is a critical skill shortage

and labour market has never been tighter in Australia. Last month we hit 15 million jobs in Australia for the first time. We had a vacancy rate of 2.8%, which is the highest and tightest it has ever been since record keeping started in 1994. In the Northern Territory we have the tightest labour market. For every one vacancy we have one unemployed person looking for work. If we wanted to come up with a number we could easily say there are 5,000 unfilled vacant jobs, which is being conservative.

The industries feeling the most pain are health and community services; in two or three months it will be construction; and in the short term Dry Season, tourism and hospitality. We are working hard to get a clear idea of the exact number of people that means in the Barkly and Big Rivers, for example, so we can say we need another 200 electricians so we will grow 100 of our own and bring 50 from overseas.

Ms BOOTHBY: The fourth annual Buy Local report on the Buy Local Plan was critical of the NTG, citing dealing with unreliable and incomplete procurement information and statistics. Does the Buy Local Plan work?

Mr KIRBY: Yes, it does. We will continue to push hard. We do not fear feedback that may not be glowing at different times. We get behind our Buy Local initiatives. A massive amount of money is contracted out by government and a significant portion of that comes back into the Northern Territory. We are proud of putting a sharp focus on ensuring as much money released by the government can be kept in the Northern Territory as possible.

Ms BOOTHBY: Can you touch on the 24 opportunities for improvement the plan went through?

Mr DRABSCH: We did not agree with all the comments made by the Buy Local advocate. His perspective was driven by frustration that he did not have the precise data he needed to make an absolute assessment.

As we have discussed with the Buy Local advocate through the procurement review board and other CEs who sit around the table with Mr Stedman, the culture of Buy Local is well and truly entrenched in government procurement activities. We have been working actively in a range of areas to develop the Value for Territory assessment framework and with offshore gas and prospective onshore gas developers to maximise their local participation with businesses and workers.

The Aboriginal Procurement Policy was just released. If you look at the statistics of contracts awarded to Territory enterprises with a value of \$15,000 or more it equates to 76.7%, which was above last year's total of 75.7%. Importantly, of the contracts awarded to Territory enterprises, almost 90% year to date have been awarded to Territory enterprises, compared to 81% last year. They are strong results. It is a high level of local content.

The level of complaints to the Buy Local advocate have decreased over the years. Once we developed the Value for Territory assessment framework—we articulated the criteria that will apply for local content and other procurement assessment criteria in clear terms. We are in the process of systematising it after close consultation with industry and government procurement officials. The attitude of maximising opportunities for Territory enterprises is well entrenched within the activities of the government. Not all contracts will be awarded.

We have the Industry Capability Network, which we actively encourage and require government procurement agencies to consult with to ensure they are aware of all Territory business that could undertake that work. We are on the board of the ICN. We are working actively with private industries, such as gas and other miners to make sure they utilise the ICN's services as much as possible. That gives Territory businesses the best chance to compete for work.

While I understand Mr Stedman's frustration with the precision of the data, a lot of that is because we do not have clear data on small contracts between \$1,000 and \$15,000—tier one contracts. The vast bulk of those will be acquired by Territory businesses, because interstate businesses will not bid for work of that size.

Output 3.2 – Workforce

No questions.

OUTPUT GROUP 4.0 – INDUSTRY STRATEGY

Output 4.1 – Industry Development and Economic Analysis

No questions.

OUTPUT GROUP 5.0 – TOURISM, SERVICES AND HOSPITALITY

Mr DEPUTY CHAIR: Output 5.1 is the responsibility of another minister.

Output 5.2 – Events

Mr BURGOYNE: Where is the income from events funded by Northern Territory Major Events Company found?

Mr KIRBY: The Major Events Company is a corporation that receives a one-off grant of \$28m. As a company—as a statutory organisation—it provides services with the allocation of that grant funding.

Mr BURGOYNE: For example, how much money is allocated by Major Events Company to Parrtjima and how much revenue is generated by the event?

Mr KIRBY: There are complexities. I need to be honest with the committee regarding how it has been explained to me. As government, we do not go into detail about discussions of individual funding arrangements. We often get economic modelling. If you looked at the supercar weekend, you could hazard a guess at how many people were here from interstate. NTMEC is good at modelling exactly what the financial return is to the Northern Territory. They have the capacity to measure some of that.

Mr LOVETT: The Major Events Company is a company; it is registered. It is owned by the Northern Territory Government and receives a budget appropriation through a grant every year, to the value of \$28m next year. The matters of income and expenditure for each respective event owned by the company is a matter for the company. We do not get visibility, per se, on the granular data of the income and expenditure on that event or any of the owned events from NT Major Events.

Mr BURGOYNE: It begs the question, how are we able to put a KPI on value for money for Territorians for the events we are investing in and the income they may be generating for the Northern Territory?

Mr KIRBY: For the body of work major Events do and the relationships they engender it is easy to see that for the millions of dollars we invest the return to the Northern Territory is significantly in advance of it.

I had the wonderful opportunity to be in Alice Springs for the most recent Parrtjima Festival. The number of people at that festival and in hotels who were clearly not from Alice Springs—it will be the same situation with the Finke race and the footy; that was the case with the footy games in the Top End and the supercar event on the weekend. The return on investment for the Northern Territory will speak for itself.

Mr LOVETT: We do not have the data for the 2022 Parrtjima event yet. Each event has economic modelling done by IER, an independent company. They also do work on NPS, the net promoter score, on what people said, what they liked and did not like, which gives the team visibility on future event development.

From the 2021 data, Parrtjima alone had a \$14m economic stimulus for the event overall. The Supercars, BASSINTEGRASS and Red CentreNATS events would be well north of those numbers. The minister spoke about the V8 Supercar event—without having the exact number from last year in front of me, the town is completely booked out, many times over. The return on investment is significant.

Mr BURGOYNE: What is the ongoing commitment to Red CentreNATS by the Major Events Company?

Mr KIRBY: I can talk in general terms. I will not be able to talk in financial terms because of commercial-in-confidence reasons. The individual allocations do not come across my desk for good reasons. The events, whether it be Finke, Red CentreNATS or even the footy, are massively important to people in Central Australia. For example, people up here for the drags event over the weekend who were tied in with the supercars and superbikes were looking forward to going to Alice Springs for the Red CentreNATS weekend, too.

There is commitment from us and understanding of how much they bring to the Territory. Outside of that, every person we speak to whether it was owners of a supercar franchise, CE, mechanic in the shed, driver, somebody from the Drags, one of the bike riders—we present something in the Northern Territory that other parts of Australia cannot. It is not just because it is cold in other parts of Australia at this time of year. They set themselves to have this as the pinnacle of the year for all those events.

BASSINTEGRASS alone stands firmly as one of the premiere music events around the nation. A lot of people will continue to come up for that.

We guarantee our focus and commitment will remain for those events, particularly the ones in Central Australia. We will continue to look at how we can expand on the months in Alice Springs when we do not traditionally get people there. It is hard in the hot weather during November and December, and up here when it starts to get into rainy weather. It is difficult to do.

We have a good team at NTMEC. They will continue to explore and push the boundaries. The caveat I have given them as minister is that it is not their job to say no. It is their job to expand, look at new opportunities and to continue to grow those events in the Northern Territory. It is my job to take the opportunities forward and convince Treasury and Cabinet that they are worthwhile. As you saw on the weekend, the events are worthwhile and they bring so much to the Territory.

Mr DEPUTY CHAIR: That concludes consideration of Output 5.2. Outputs 5.3, 5.4 and 5.5 are the responsibility of other ministers.

OUTPUT GROUP 6.0 – CORPORATE AND SHARED SERVICES

Output 6.1 – Corporate and Governance

Output 6.2 – Shared Services Received

No questions.

Non-Output Specific Budget-Related Questions

No questions.

Mr DEPUTY CHAIR: That concludes consideration of outputs related to Agribusiness and Fisheries; Business, Jobs and Training; and Major Events. On behalf of the committee, I thank the agency officers who assisted the minister. The committee will now move on to consider the Office of the Commissioner for Public Employment. We will have three minute break to allow staff changeover.

The committee suspended.

PUBLIC EMPLOYMENT

DEPARTMENT OF THE CHIEF MINISTER AND CABINET

Mr CHAIR: We can now move onto the Office of the Commissioner for Public Employment. Minister, I invite you to introduce the officials accompanying you and to make an opening statement if you wish.

Mr KIRBY: I introduce Commissioner for Public Employment Vicki Telfer PSM, and her assistants Cheryl Winstanley and Libby Doney. I do not have further opening remarks.

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

Mr YAN: What is the average employment separation/turnover rate so far for this financial year and how does it compare to last year?

Commissioner TELFER: We do not have that data to hand. The turnover rates are measured as at 30 June each year. I suggest we take that question on notice.

Question on Notice No 7.7

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

Mr YAN: What is the average employment separation/turnover rate so far this financial year, and how does it compare to last year?

Mr DEPUTY CHAIR: Minister, do you accept the question?

Mr KIRBY: Yes.

Mr DEPUTY CHAIR: The question asked by the Member for Namatjira has been allocated number 7.7.

Mr YAN: Can you detail the number of resignations compared to last year?

Mr KIRBY: Being a specific question, we will not have the exact detail.

Question on Notice No 7.8

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

Mr YAN: Can you detail the exact number of resignations compared to last year?

Mr DEPUTY CHAIR: Minister, do you accept the question?

Mr KIRBY: Yes.

Mr DEPUTY CHAIR: The question asked by the Member for Namatjira has been allocated number 7.8.

Mr YAN: What is the number of NT public servants as at the reporting period?

Mr KIRBY: In March 2021 there were 22,140 FTE and in March 2022 there were 22,535 FTEs. Overall, numbers have increased by 395 FTEs.

Mr YAN: Why did the Office of the NT Commissioner for Public Employment engage legal counsel from Adelaide, Ms Kirsty Stewart, to advocate for them in the full bench matter with the Fair Work Commission?

Mr KIRBY: I understand, as you do, the complexities of the industrial relations world. It would not be unusual to rely on advice.

Ms TELFER: My recollection of the matter in which Ms Stewart was involved was one of such sufficient complexity that we decided to engage legal counsel to assist us. We do not do that very often, only if the matters are complex. I am proud that our team generally manage all the matters in house, including where applicants engage counsel themselves.

Mr YAN: What was the cost to NT taxpayers to utilise Ms Stewart's legal services to date?

Mr KIRBY: I will not have those figures. I doubt that our commissioner will. I will have to take advice on whether I can get those figures and if it is okay to release them.

Mr YAN: I am happy to take that on notice.

Question on Notice No 7.9

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

Mr YAN: How much have NT taxpayers paid Ms Stewart for legal services to date?

Mr DEPUTY CHAIR: Minister, do you accept the question?

Mr KIRBY: Yes.

Mr DEPUTY CHAIR: The question asked by the Member for Namatjira has been allocated number 7.9.

Mr KIRBY: It is a long few weeks and a taxing time. I thank the members of the commissioner's office present and those who have done the hard work over the last couple of trying years.

Mr DEPUTY CHAIR: We will adjourn for today. I thank Minister Kirby and his staff for all of their efforts. I thank the opposition and Independents for their input.

The committee concluded.
