



PARLIAMENT OF TASMANIA

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL

ESTIMATES COMMITTEE A

Hon. Eric Abetz MP

Tuesday 2 June 2026

MEMBERS

Hon Ruth Forrest MLC (Chair)

Hon Clare Gade-Wright MLC

Hon Sarah Lovell

Hon Cassy O'Connor MLC

Hon Bec Thomas MLC

OTHER PARTICIPATING MEMBERS

IN ATTENDANCE

HON. ERIC ABETZ MP

Minister for the Environment; Minister for Innovation, Science, and the Digital Economy;
Minister for Arts and Heritage

Minister for Arts and Heritage

Department of State Growth (Arts)

Brett Stewart

Deputy Secretary

Dr David Sudmails

Director, Creative Tasmania

Mary Mulcahy

CEO, Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery

Alex Sangston

Manager Screen Tasmania

Joe Kanizay

Budget Consultant

Innovation, Science and the Digital Economy

Department of State Growth

Mike Mogridge

Deputy Secretary

Ben Marquis

Director, Economic Strategy

Travis Boutcher

Director, Finance

Sarah Thomson

Executive Director, Business Industry and Investment

Department of Premier and Cabinet

Noelene Kelly

Deputy Secretary

Dr Justin Thurley

Chief Information Officer

Mat Healey
Deputy Secretary, Strategy and Delivery

Ministerial Office

Tristan Bick
Chief of Staff

Jeremy Grey
Senior Advisor

Environment (including Climate Change)

Jason Jacobi
Secretary

Louise Wilson
Deputy Secretary

Catherine Murdoch
CEO - Environment Protection Authority

(in the room)

Jo Crisp
General Manager, Environment

Holly Mackey
A/CEO - Tasmanian Waste and Resource Recovery Board

Daryl Cook
Director - Finfish Compliance - EPA

Cindy Ong
Director - Environmental Regulation - EPA

Raymond Bannister
Manager - Salmon Science and Standards - EPA

ReCFIT (Climate Change)

Vanessa Pinto
A/CEO, Renewables, Climate and Future Industries Tasmania

Dr Sarah Russell
Director, Climate Change

DSG (Climate Change)

Nikki Krushka

Assistant Director, Climate Change

Garth Dickinson

Senior Adviser

Angela Conway

Deputy Secretary, Business Services

Ministerial Office representatives

Tristan Bick

Chief of Staff

Alister Pearce

Senior Adviser

Kandace Gilligan

PUBLIC

Arts and Heritage

The committee met at 4.55 p.m.

CHAIR - Thank you and we can call you minister at this time, not acting or anything else. Thanks, minister, for appearing before the committee in the portfolios of Heritage and Arts, Innovation, Science and Digital Tech and Economy and the Environment. We will get a slightly longer break for dinner because we will have the EPA before dinner. You will get a break then. I know you've had a long day, as we have too. Minister, if you can introduce the people at the table and then make an opening statement if you wish.

Mr ABETZ - Look an opening statement indicating all my knowledge in the area would be extremely short so I won't even bother with that, but what I will do is introduce deputy secretary Louise Wilson sitting on my left. Will Joscelyne on my right, general manager Heritage and his right, Melissa Ford, director, Heritage Tasmania. With that we're open for questions.

CHAIR - Heritage first, from Sarah, was it?

Ms LOVELL - No, just a general one from me around the operational efficiencies. Can you explain the operational efficiencies?

Ms WILSON - Thank you. Through you, minister, the department has operational efficiency savings targets set over the next few years over \$4.9 million in 2026-27, \$13.977 million in 2027-28, \$19.9 million in 2028-29 and \$20 million in 2029-30 and these are the new savings allocations allocated in this Budget.

Ms LOVELL - And how are you going to achieve those?

Ms WILSON - We are on track to deliver on our savings targets for 2025-26, so that's really good news. We achieved these savings by through really close management of discretionary expenditures such as printing, travel, fleet costs, consultants, advertising and communications. We also introduced in 2025-26 in March an executive committee that reviewed all of the recruitment. We monitored recruitment and managed how we placed those. We would look for opportunities where we would question: is that position still required, could we fill it through a different way through temporary or permanent deployment of others elsewhere in the agency? Could we reprofile the positions so maybe lower the level and change the duties. That's a small savings. Lots of different sorts of approaches. I'm really pleased to say that we are on track to achieve those savings. That is in this financial year.

Looking forward, we are developing a budget sustainability plan and that will be a comprehensive plan that will look at a range of measures. These measures will include all the things that I mentioned, the discretionary spending and looking to have further savings in those spaces where we can, particularly intrastate travel and fleet - we've got some opportunities because, in our agency - we are statewide and we have a lot of remote staff and staff statewide.

We are developing and moving towards a one-fleet agency, so we want to consolidate all of our government vehicles, not including specialist vehicles that are needed for remote fieldwork, et cetera, but our, sort of, G cars. We're also looking to move to electric vehicles where it's appropriate. The One Fleet Project, what we intend to do there is to get better

PUBLIC

utilisation of our existing vehicles, so they're not sitting in business units - maybe some business units - underutilised or over utilised and in short supply in other areas. Over time with those efficiencies we may even be able to reduce vehicles, we'll see, and we are doing workforce planning; that's another element of our budget sustainability planning and so across all of those measures, there are probably other things I've got in my notes I could mention, but you have heard about it in the last session.

CHAIR - Yeah, yeah, with the previous minister - a while ago.

Ms WILSON - We're pretty confident it will be tough, but all areas we're going to look at everything that we can on a case-by-case basis and when we have that plan in place we'll have a better idea of how the savings will be broken down.

CHAIR - Just on that, are you expecting to require any redundancies in this area, voluntary or otherwise?

Ms WILSON - Through you, minister, as per the Premier's announcement, we will be looking to have that EOI process for TVNRs and what we intend to do is look at each application on its merits and look at things like: can that role actually be abolished? What will the impact be on critical business - service delivery?

CHAIR - The question was more; do you expect to need them to make the savings target?

Ms O'CONNOR - You'll have to if you're cutting \$2 million across the forward Estimates.

Mr ABETZ - All depends on what natural attrition I suppose is anticipated -

CHAIR - The question is are you expecting to need to use the voluntary redundancies or not?

Mr ABETZ - Yes, and I don't know that.

Ms WILSON - Through you, minister, the secretary has issued communications with the agency and made it clear that he, Jason Jacobi, will assess each application. Just because someone has applied for one doesn't mean they'll necessarily get one, but we will be looking.

CHAIR - No, the question - let me get back to the question, okay. The question is: to achieve your savings, do you think you'll need to apply voluntary redundancies to get there?

Ms WILSON - Through you, minister, I wouldn't want to speak on behalf of the secretary. This announcement has just been quite recent but, as I said, our budget sustainability plan will look at everything and every option that we can and we will assess TVNRs in ours and I'm sure that well, I probably shouldn't speak on behalf of the secretary, but there's every chance that there may be some that we think are appropriate.

CHAIR - How will having to pay for separations, either voluntary redundancies, which depend on the length of service, can be quite expensive, or maybe less, but in any event, with any staff separation there's leave liabilities that crystallise, et cetera - has that been factored into your plan and will that mean that the task is larger?

PUBLIC

Ms WILSON - Through you, minister, the plan hasn't been fully developed yet. We're starting to look at that very seriously. Obviously, the cost of redundancies also needs to be taken into account, but we also have the option of workplace renewal incentive payments, we call those WRIPs. They might be appropriate.

Sorry, I'll just make sure I heard the question right, if you wouldn't mind repeating that again. I may not have answered it.

CHAIR - What I'm trying to understand is: if you do need to pay for any separations like WRIPs - there will be a separation associated with a WRIP - is that something that's already factored into the operational efficiency or will that be on top of? Because I can't find anywhere and we did ask you in a former role as Treasurer whether there's any provision in the Budget for redundancies. It appears not, but I'm just clarifying with your expectation.

Mr ABETZ - Look, I would anticipate this department is no different from other departments. There hasn't been specific provision in relation to any of the departments, but overall, we are anticipating - and I said that in the Budget speech - that there will be some initial costs, dealing with these matters, but then there will be the lower payroll to offset that.

CHAIR - That won't happen straightaway.

Mr ABETZ - No, exactly.

CHAIR - And redundancy payments or the separation costs appear immediately?

Mr ABETZ - Hmm.

CHAIR - Yeah. And that means, if you're going to achieve the savings target or the expected amount that's laid out in the budget papers, you have to save more in this first year, if you have to fund staff separations. That would be a fact, wouldn't it?

Mr ABETZ - Well, not necessarily, but in some it may, because each department and section will be determining its own savings methodologies and what they can and can't do.

CHAIR - But where there's staff separations involved in achieving the savings required that's an additional cost that will create the need for further savings to deliver?

Mr ABETZ - Albeit that is offset by the savings that may be made later on in the year. So, for example, if you had to pay somebody and I would assume potentially more, but if you only had to pay three-months salary for the separation, then by the end of the year with another nine months, you would have made that -

CHAIR - That presumes they all go on 1 July, Treasurer, and we know that won't happen. We heard that in another portfolio - not with you - that these plans won't even be in place till probably August, or maybe later and some other time you can implement this. There won't be a full year in which to regain those savings, if you like, from this workforce.

Mr ABETZ - Yeah, and look, as a result, the quicker departments and agencies can get their plans together, the better for them.

PUBLIC

Ms O'CONNOR - Can I just check something in terms of, just to clarify. How many staff are employed in the historic heritage unit?

Ms WILSON - I've got it. I just have to look it up. Through you, minister, it's around about -

Mr ABETZ - Somebody else knows.

CHAIR - Someone knows.

Ms WILSON - Of course the director would know.

Ms FORD - Through you, minister, there's 17 headcount at the moment and it works out at about 15 FTEs.

Ms O'CONNOR - Interesting, because if you calculate out the level of the cut over four years, it's roughly \$2 million, which is, I mean in crude FTE terms is about 15 FTEs. So, what is the expectation on historic heritage in terms of how you'd achieve these savings? Because it's all very well to rationalise your fleet, and talk about supplies and consumables, all those things that we hear every year, but the bottom line is the agency or the division is expected to find \$2 million in savings over four years, which on a rough count is about 15 FTEs. So, what sort of historic heritage division will we be left with after the efficiencies as they're called, or cuts, are found?

Ms WILSON - Through you, minister, you're absolutely right, small areas and very small budget outputs do need to be very carefully managed. We haven't targeted any particular areas as part of our budget sustainability plan. However, our expectation - the expectation of the secretary and the executive of which I'm a part - is that every area will look to contribute. This is a shared responsibility, but we do have to be very, very careful with very small areas, as, very much like in Heritage Tasmania, there are statutory functions that need to be delivered.

So, in any TVNR EOI applications, or budget saving strategies, we do need to be mindful of continuing to deliver on those statutory responsibilities. But, as I sort of touched on earlier, savings and efficiencies can be made through all sorts of ways and necessity is the mother of invention and we're finding that already staff are coming up with new ideas. We still have to stress -

Ms O'CONNOR - To try to save their jobs?

Ms WILSON - No, not to save their jobs, but to genuinely contribute and find - they're actually, I guess - a lot of the creativity is coming out of business process review and technology, AI, et cetera, but there's a lot that we can do in terms of just looking at different ways of working. Another element of our budget savings plan, not that it's finished yet, but we're scoping it and working through what tools we might have and that is looking at - I'm not saying this specifically in Heritage Tas - but appropriate and fair cost recovery. There are some areas in the agency that do not recover their costs and some areas that don't - that couldn't review their fees or charges because they are doing complex activities and, you know, the charges or fees haven't changed materially and they don't match the work.

PUBLIC

Ms O'CONNOR - Okay, thank you for that answer. So - and I know this is slightly unfair on the new, potentially short-term minister for Heritage -

Mr ABETZ - But it won't stop you.

Ms O'CONNOR - No. Well, it's a reasonable question and if the former minister was sitting here, I'd ask her the same question, but she misled this committee last November. The question is: as Treasurer and minister for however long you are, you would recognise the risk to the way we manage, protect, assess heritage and maintain the register of, sort of, hollowing out the divisions, skills and talented people, is high given how small the division is, and that great care is required in requiring this division to find its savings: great care.

Mr ABETZ - Look, I find myself in the difficult position of agreeing with the member for Hobart -

CHAIR - Gosh, that's a bit of a dangerous situation to find yourself.

Mr ABETZ - and I have every confidence that the secretary of the department will consider all those matters in determining where voluntary redundancies ought to be accepted and where not.

Ms O'CONNOR - Just last question, sorry, Ms Thomas, because I know you've got plenty of questions, but we heard Ms Wilson talk earlier about how AI could be implemented in the division. What sort of functions does the director or the dep sec understand that AI might be able to perform in a division like Historic Heritage?

Mr ABETZ - Who wants the pleasure of answering that?

Mr JOSCELYNE - Through you, minister, there's probably a full gamut of opportunities. There's a pure regulatory function where it's, for example, doing checks of references against standards for works, for example. On the other side, when we talk about things like registration, and I can say already that the branch is already doing some of this work, which is to use AI to support research, not to be the final say, not to be the - but as another tool to say, okay, we've got a research question here regarding a historic place. It could be, you know, in relation to what information might be out there as a primary source, and this is a good way of doing an initial scan, for example, so we're already taking early steps in relation to using these kinds of tools. We would expect that that will continue to mature as an opportunity going forward.

Ms O'CONNOR - Thank you, Mr Joscelyne. You are aware that there's plenty of research out there now that shows that AI makes up references, refers to facts that are not facts, so where is the checking going to happen? Will it be actual human beings, you know, with beating hearts, who will be cross-checking on any material that's produced by a robot?

Mr JOSCELYNE - Through you, minister, absolutely.

Ms O'CONNOR - Great, thanks.

Ms THOMAS - Thank you. I have questions about a couple of things. One is about Halls Hut and the other one is about National Trust funding, just to give you a heads-up. In relation

PUBLIC

to Halls Hut, minister, what is your understanding, or the department's understanding of the current state of Halls Hut?

Mr ABETZ - Look, I could read out the brief that I've got in front of me, but possibly Mr Joscelyne can give you the -

CHAIR - Can summarise it.

Mr ABETZ - Yes, summarised version.

Mr JOSCELYNE - Minister, through you, we're aware that there are concerns regarding the condition of Halls Hut. We've received what I would call intelligence, successive packets of intelligence regarding the condition of the hut and -

CHAIR - Including photographs?

Mr JOSCELYNE - Including photographs.

Ms O'CONNOR - Yes.

Mr JOSCELYNE - So, we're working to further establish the condition of the hut, in concert with the current leaseholder, and we, in fact I, have written on behalf of the Heritage Council seeking the provision of a condition report with certain requirements to be met, such that can then be further considered by the Tasmanian Heritage Council, and it can then further determine what action it may, or may not take.

Ms THOMAS - When does that condition report have to be provided by?

Mr JOSCELYNE - So, we've made a request for that to be provided, essentially as soon as possible. There have been some dates specified, those have passed, and we are expecting the report imminently. What I would say is that there is a Tasmanian Heritage Council meeting on the 17th of this month, and that will be an opportunity for them to consider the report, should they have received it by that point in time, or to determine another course of action if it has not been forthcoming by that time.

Ms THOMAS - Okay.

CHAIR - Can you provide a copy of the letter you wrote, the outlines, what you're expecting to get?

Mr JOSCELYNE - I can. There is a copy on the public record already on the NRE Tas web page.

CHAIR - Well, then, there will be no trouble, then, providing it to the committee. That would be great.

Ms THOMAS - So what happens if that - what are the possible - or are you able to tell the committee, through you, minister, what the other possible outcomes are if a condition report's not provided; what avenues exist for you to take action?

PUBLIC

Mr JOSCELYNE - Through you, minister, I wouldn't want to prejudice a decision of the Heritage Council in relation to any action it may or may not take. There are some clear provisions in the act -

Ms THOMAS - Okay.

Mr JOSCELYNE - in relation to these - such matters as this -

CHAIR - So, who can you provide that - sorry.

Mr JOSCELYNE - section 60 in particular -

Ms THOMAS - Section what, sorry?

Mr JOSCELYNE - which I'm sure the Heritage Council will turn its mind to.

CHAIR - Section?

Ms WILSON - 60.

Mr JOSCELYNE - 60.

Ms THOMAS - Okay.

CHAIR - Okay, so who will you report to?

Ms THOMAS - The council.

Mr JOSCELYNE - The Heritage Council.

CHAIR - Yes, and then the Heritage Council reports to the minister, whoever that might be, or what?

Mr JOSCELYNE - Heritage - sorry, through you, minister. Heritage Council operates in these functions independently from the minister for Heritage -

Ms THOMAS - So it has its own powers, under the act.

Mr JOSCELYNE - It's an independent statutory body.

Ms THOMAS - Okay.

CHAIR - So the minister for Parks tells us he was awaiting that outcome. So, how will he get it, the report? Because he made it clear to this committee that he was awaiting that, he was aware it had been requested, a condition report. Will that be provided to him, or how will he then satisfy himself that the conditions of the lease are being met?

Mr JOSCELYNE - So, through you, minister, and I think you've actually indicated something quite important to this point, is that that is a lease matter, which is for the minister for Parks, that's not the primary -

PUBLIC

CHAIR - He is waiting on this, before he can look at whether it has been breached or not.

Mr JOSCELYNE - Indeed, and so we are responsible for the heritage component, and in terms of delivering on the functions of the Heritage Council, that's what we will do. Now, that will then become information that will be obviously relevant to the Minister for Parks, but that's a matter, first and foremost for us, is to support the heritage council in its obligations.

CHAIR - So, will the minister for Parks have to request that, and how will he know when it's done?

Mr JOSCELYNE - I think we would - through you, minister, I think given that we're one agency, we would be seeking to provide that naturally across the areas of the department at a time that it's received.

CHAIR - So, because the minister seemed to be batting it back off to you, minister, as the minister at the moment, for Heritage, to say that he can't do anything until he gets his report, but it's sort of like this, you know, sort of compartmentalised - but you're telling - well, I'm hearing, minister, that because it's one department, any report or findings from the heritage council will be fed through to the relevant minister, which includes the minister for Parks; am I correct in that?

Mr ABETZ - Look, whilst I enjoy the power that I do, I would encourage Mr Joscelyne, as soon as the report is received, to ensure that it moves onto another desk into Parks, so that the minister for Parks can be informed as to its content.

CHAIR - Right. So we would expect that to - because we asked the Minister for Parks some time - but if it's not provided before your next meeting on the 17th, I think you said, of this month, then when's the next meeting?

Ms LOVELL - Can I ask a question on that too?

CHAIR - Yes. When's the next meeting after that?

Ms THOMAS - They said they'll consider their powers.

A witness - Two months.

Mr JOSCELYNE - Through you, minister, two months after.

CHAIR - Right. So, you'll consider your powers, but there is another meeting in two months.

Ms LOVELL - You mentioned before that some dates had been specified, but those dates had passed. Are you able to share with the committee what dates they were? How long ago the report had been requested and the dates that you had provided?

Mr JOSCELYNE - Certainly. In the correspondence I had with the leaseholder -

CHAIR - I think you've got a copy there to table, have you?

PUBLIC

Mr JOSCELYNE - No, that's not the version.

CHAIR - Oh, sorry. That's not it. Right.

Mr JOSCELYNE - I wrote on 2 March to the leaseholder, and the initial request was for the information to be provided within a month.

CHAIR - In a month?

Mr JOSCELYNE - Within a month. Now, we received a response immediately acknowledging my letter, which had also been a request. That indicated that it would be by mid-April that the site would be able to be visited. We're seeking to be reasonable in this request as well because this is a remote place that is not easy to get to, so, there is some practicality that we would ordinarily afford to somebody that has to do a difficult piece of work. We understand that the leaseholder has been engaging with Parks regarding access to fulfil this request specifically.

CHAIR - So, you think by the middle of June it's a reasonable request from the Heritage Council to have the information they need to make their decision or assessment?

Mr JOSCELYNE - We would hope that we will receive this information by this time. Should it not be received, then that's a matter the Heritage Council can further consider.

Ms LOVELL - Do you know what the issue is around access? Or why there's a delay?

Mr JOSCELYNE - There's probably the two key ones: it is remote; secondly, now there is a seasonal factor as well, which means that the ability to access the site is there are shorter days, difficult weather -

CHAIR - It'd be better in summer. When you wrote in March, the days were much longer then, weren't they?

Mr JOSCELYNE - That's where, I think, in the seeking of this resolution, there is some practicality that we would have to make sure we're mindful of.

Ms LOVELL - When you say engaging with Parks around access, what's required there to Parks - are Parks assisting with access? What are they looking for in that engagement?

Mr JOSCELYNE - That, for example, would take the form of a discussion regarding access by air. It's not permitted to access or land any type of vehicle in a national park, for example, without approval.

Ms O'CONNOR - Hear, hear.

Mr JOSCELYNE - Those are some discussions that are ongoing with Parks.

Ms O'CONNOR - That's partly what brought Mr Hack undone was that he wanted to helicopter people in and out.

Ms THOMAS - Can I move into grants? Because that's what my National Trust -

PUBLIC

CHAIR - I just had a couple of those in Heritage, if that's all right. Minister, how many members sit on the Heritage Council at the moment?

Mr ABETZ - That's so easy, I'll let somebody else answer it.

Ms O'CONNOR - Now chaired by your former colleague Mr Stephen Parry.

Mr ABETZ - A good choice.

Ms O'CONNOR - I'm sure it was a rigorous selection process, I'm sure.

Mr ABETZ - Yes, it was.

Ms O'CONNOR - Totally hands off.

Mr ABETZ - It was.

CHAIR - You can ask about that in a minute, if you'd like.

Ms FORD - There are 15 members on the Heritage Council.

CHAIR - In terms of costs, that's a large board or council, minister. When your government's had a policy to try to reduce board members, thus costs and et cetera, do you think that's a reasonable number or do you think that's a few too many?

Mr ABETZ - Look, on the face of it, it seems like a large number. I don't know if there are specific people on that board for specific purposes. I don't know and I would need to avail myself of what the legislation tells us in setting that up; whether the legislation sets the number et cetera. I've just been provided -

CHAIR - But the act does prescribe fields of expertise.

Mr ABETZ - the constitution of the Heritage committee. If somebody can tell me - I'd dare say the letter L is the 15th letter in the alphabet, is it? No, it's the 12th letter in the alphabet, but then you also have a chair - I know the chairperson's here. So, who are the other three? Do we know?

CHAIR - That's the constitution that reflects the enabling legislation?

Mr JOSCELYNE - That's correct. This specifies the roles and the membership and it's indicative of when the Heritage Council was first formed. It brought together expertise in relation to heritage matters and it also brought together representatives of key groups in Tasmania with a strong interest in heritage protection and -

CHAIR - Is it possible that people could fulfil two of those at once? Sometimes when we're on boards, we're looking for gender diversity - like members of the CALD community - is it possible that you could make the numbers less by attracting individuals who have more than one attribute to meet that? Or are they so disparate that you couldn't possibly have a person fulfil two requirements?

PUBLIC

Mr ABETZ - Wait a minute, item C of the letters is for a persons, so I dare say, is where the other numbers are made up. Chair, on the face of it, 15 seems a substantial number and we are consultative government and I'd like to have inclusion in these things. But I must say, on the face of it, 15 does seem a sizeable number and whoever has the joy of this portfolio, I'll pass on to them that consideration.

CHAIR - Great. What's the budget for the council? How much of the Heritage budget is taken up with the operation of the council?

Ms FORD - The budget is \$140,000 a year.

Ms O'CONNOR - Not much. They get paid \$10,000 to \$12,000 a year.

Ms FORD - No, they're paid just under \$4000 if you're a member, and, if you're a deputy chair, \$8000. The chair gets paid \$35,000 a year.

Ms O'CONNOR - Small beans.

Ms THOMAS - Nowhere near what the design panellists for the stadium must get paid. Shipped them in from interstate.

Ms FORD - They are also entitled to claim reasonable reimbursement of travel expenses and also we have a payment for people who sit on a subcommittee, which is a small amount.

Ms THOMAS - Talking about committees, did your output, your department, have any input into the design review panel for the Macquarie Point Stadium membership? Minister, my understanding is that there is - well, I know there is - a design review panel established for the Macquarie Point stadium development. The panel has been established with membership and a rather interesting - I didn't ask you about this yesterday, perhaps I should have - interesting process by which members were engaged on that panel, and my understanding is Scott Balmforth is the chair of that panel, but nominations were sought by way of reaching out to people in the know across Australia to say, 'Do you know of anyone who'd be good for this panel?' Anyway, that's a question for another day, but I am just interested to know whether there was any discussion with Heritage Tasmania or the Heritage Council about the establishment of that panel, what the terms of reference might be, and what the membership might be?

Mr JOSCELYNE - Heritage Tasmania was absolutely involved in discussions regarding the formation of the order at the time. In terms of the appointments to the panel, that was the subject of a request from the department administering the order to NRE Tas to provide a nominee.

Ms THOMAS - To NRE Tas to provide a nominee? Okay.

Has Heritage Tasmania or the Heritage Council been engaged in anything further in relation to the stadium order?

Mr JOSCELYNE - Through you, minister, the Tasmanian Heritage Council is not specifically required under the order to perform any function. There are roles for Heritage Tasmania in relation to the review and endorsement of certain documentation that is required

PUBLIC

to be produced by the corporation, and Heritage Tasmania will do that work when the corporation produces that documentation, as required by the order.

Ms THOMAS - Okay and do you know what administrative burden or resource burden that is likely to place on the output?

Mr JOSCELYNE - Through you minister, we would be expecting to accommodate that within our BAU (business as usual), we would call it. There will be some work to do, but we will address that as part of our ordinary resourcing.

Ms THOMAS - Okay, as you would for other projects.

Ms FORD - Through you, minister, I wanted to add to that Heritage Tasmania was involved in the new Bridgewater Bridge project and provided considerable advice and regulatory oversight too on behalf of the Heritage Council. That project is nearing completion. This would be seen as replacing another significant project.

CHAIR - That's good context. Thank you. Can I move now on to grants and subsidies.

Grants and Subsidies

Ms THOMAS - The grants and subsidies line I noticed dropped from \$17.57 million in 2025-26 to \$4.68 million in 2026-27 and stabilises at that across the forward Estimates around the \$4 to \$5 million mark. That's a significant drop of almost \$13 million in grants and subsidies. What is that grants and subsidies line made up of? Are you able to provide a breakdown minister of what's included in that line and how much is for external organisations to be funded?

Mr ABETZ - Are you referring to the Port Arthur?

Ms THOMAS - I'm referring to sorry, page 165 of budget paper 2.

Mr ABETZ - It is 165, sorry I'm on 168. Happens all the time and which line?

Ms THOMAS - The very bottom line there.

Mr ABETZ - Grants and subsidies.

CHAIR - It does tell you on the additional page.

Ms WILSON - Through you, minister, I believe those numbers are referring to the same, they're the same numbers on page 168. I draw your attention to - that's the Port Arthur Historic Site Management Authority funding.

Ms THOMAS - Okay, oh yes, thank you. Right okay, so all of that grants and subsidies is for Port Arthur Historic Site Management Authority.

Ms WILSON - Yes, that's correct.

PUBLIC

Ms THOMAS - Okay, thank you. In terms of funding to other organisations, it sounds like that must be included in the 6.1 output then, right?

Ms WILSON - No, that's done.

Ms THOMAS - Sorry, I will be a bit clearer in my questioning. I mentioned I was going to ask about the National Trust. The National Trust received some funding from the government. How much do they receive?

Ms WILSON - Through you minister, the National Trust has historically received base funding from the government of \$312,000 per year. In 2025-26 this has been supplemented by funding of \$42,000 through round three of the Built Heritage Grant Scheme to undertake conservation works at Oak Lodge which will support improved community access.

In addition to that funding - funding that's historically received, the \$312,000 - there has been significant additional funding provided for different sorts of projects over the years.

Ms THOMAS - That's okay. Going forward into 2026-27, will they receive that \$312,000 base funding again?

Ms WILSON - The funding continues in 2026-27, the \$312,000.

Ms THOMAS - And does it continue on through the forward Estimates?

Ms WILSON - The funding goes through up until the end of 2026-27 but doesn't continue beyond that point.

Ms THOMAS - Okay, that's fairly concerning given the number of properties that the National Trust in Tasmania cares for, the preservation and presentation of our special heritage places that are held in trust for us all, as far as I understand it, under an act of parliament actually. Is that right, minister?

Mr ABETZ - I think there is an act of parliament protecting our heritage and that's how items or properties, I should say, are put on that list through the council.

Ms WILSON - Through you minister, there is the *National Trust Act*. I don't recall the year of that act, which has a number of provisions including appointing three members to the board and the other members are appointed by the trust membership. The trust is not the Crown even though it does have an act that sets provisions for it.

Now, the National Trust board has for some time now had in its strategic plan - a couple of consecutive strategic plans - expressed an ambition to become more financially sustainable. They have recently appointed a new CEO - a very energetic and very capable CEO. I believe they're working very hard on strategies for how to become more self sustainable, so they are not reliant on government funding and can generate revenue in their own right and be able to, I guess, deliver on its responsibilities for looking after its properties.

Ms O'CONNOR - They have statutory responsibilities to look after properties that the State of Tasmania has entrusted to the trust, and that's not to you Ms Wilson, but that's just a fact.

PUBLIC

Ms THOMAS - So, minister, what are you going to do beyond 2026-27 to ensure they can fulfil those obligations? If there's no funding provided to them in the Budget, they're not going to become self-sustaining overnight. That's a significant amount of revenue to raise - \$312,000 per annum - through the properties that they have. No matter how energetic your CEO is, in a very small organisation to be able to raise that revenue is not easy.

Mr ABETZ - Not easy. What the government will undoubtedly do, and the minister will undoubtedly do, we have funding for this year, or for the 2026-27 coming financial year and the government will consider future bids.

Ms THOMAS - Just one final one then. I understand they have had discussions with the minister or the department about a one-off investment to help them to create a sustainable future. Minister, outside of this \$312,000 operational grant, how much was that request for and is there any funding in the Budget to help them become self-sustaining?

Mr ABETZ - I will pass on both.

Mr JOSCELYNE - Through you, minister, the total of the request I understand was in the order of over \$400,000 for an initial support package.

Ms THOMAS - A one-off payment?

Mr JOSCELYNE - Yes, a one-off payment.

Ms THOMAS - Okay, but there's no money in the Budget for that.

Mr JOSCELYNE - We will continue to work with the trust in relation to the specifics of their request and what we can do within our envelope to support that and have further discussions over the next financial year.

Ms THOMAS - And minister, do you accept that there will need to be some certainty provided if the funding is only provided for the next financial year? There will need to be some certainty before this time next year in order for the trust to know that it can continue to operate and if there's not a cent allocated beyond 2026-27 at this time.

Mr ABETZ - Everybody wants certainty, which is not unreasonable and I assume those discussions will be held and input the necessary information provided to provide that certainty.

CHAIR - We might move on to Arts if that's alright.

Ms O'CONNOR - Can I just quickly check though; I will be very quick. On the heritage question, what's happening here - which is deeply concerning this reflects Ms Thomas's questioning - is that funding is being cut to the protection of historic heritage by a government that is responsible for a state whose brand is underpinned in significant part by our historic heritage. The risk here is that this lack of funding leads to a decline in our historic heritage assets which really do belong to the people of Tasmania. I just don't think it's tenable that you could not fund the National Trust.

Mr ABETZ - Which is a comment and it's on the *Hansard* for you.

PUBLIC

Ms O'CONNOR - Well, it's not designed to be on the *Hansard*, it's come from a place of worry.

Ms THOMAS - Very concerning.

CHAIR - I will follow that up.

We will move to Arts Tasmania. So, minister, when people sit down, would you mind introducing for the purpose of *Hansard*.

Mr ABETZ - I will try and do my very best, Chair. On my left is Brett Stewart, the deputy secretary, Creative Industry, Sport and Visitor Economy. On my immediate right is David Sudmalis, who is director, Creative Tasmania, and on his right is the director of TMAG, Mary Mulcahy.

CHAIR - Minister, I know we're going to push into the science, innovation, technology bit perhaps, but we did start about 15 minutes late, so we will try to catch up a little bit. Before I actually ask the questions in the arts, I just want to ask you a question, which I didn't ask yesterday because I knew you were back today: just with regard to the email that was sent to Pulse Tasmania with regard to the matters that I raised, have you checked with your chief of staff as to whether they saw the email?

Mr ABETZ - Yes. He did see the email.

CHAIR - Have you checked with him whether he forwarded it to anyone?

Mr ABETZ - I will have to check on that.

CHAIR - And if you could, who he forwarded it to.

Mr ABETZ - Yes, I can take that on notice.

CHAIR - Thank you very much.

Ms THOMAS - Which chief of staff: in this ministerial portfolio?

CHAIR - Treasury, I assume Treasury.

Mr ABETZ - I have one chief of staff.

Ms THOMAS - I know, but now you have another one. Well, no, you don't.

Mr ABETZ - No. I still have the one chief of staff, and without naming people, I think we know of whom we are talking.

CHAIR - Sure. Okay, so you will take it on notice to come back?

Mr ABETZ - Yes.

PUBLIC

CHAIR - Okay. So just in the arts industry development budget line for 2026-27, it's \$9.175 million. Can you, minister, provide a breakdown for this figure? I'm happy for this to be provided at a later time if it can't be easily provided at the table right now, the amount allocated to competitive grants, the amount allocated to four-year funded organisations, the amount allocated to the Premier's arts prize, the amount allocated to all initiatives including the Tasmanian Strategic Touring Fund and the quantum of the grant to the Queen Victoria Museum & Art Gallery (QVMAG), which doesn't appear by name in the budget papers that I could see, unless I missed it.

Mr ABETZ - Can we provide that now or on notice?

Mr STEWART - Through you, minister, we wouldn't have that specific breakdown, but I think we could probably get that to you quite quickly, so I think we would have to take that one on notice.

CHAIR - Sure, and if you can't provide it during the session or later this evening, minister, we will write to you on that.

Mr ABETZ - As soon as possible, yes.

CHAIR - Okay. So excluding the \$4.5 million one-off Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra (TSO) capital funding in 2025-26, which is related to the stadium, the underlying arts industry development figure has fallen from approximately \$9.63 million to \$9.175 million, a reduction of approximately \$450,000 in real terms, which is a lot of money for this industry. Has this reduction been applied to the competitive grants pool?

Mr STEWART - Through you, minister, there are a number of grants programs that sit in that output. Some of those were boosted as previous budget and election commitments and they're starting to come off, which is why you see that variation, but there has been the addition of an additional \$10 million across this output and the screen output, and that's been applied equally, so five and five, which effectively will kick in 2027-28, 2028-29, 2029-30 to smooth out that change. We're actually hopeful that there will be an increase in the amount of money that flows through to our arts organisations -

CHAIR - By way of grants, you're talking about competitive grants, yes?

Mr STEWART - Yes, because that total figure also includes the operational efficiencies. The operational efficiencies will reduce the overall output, but with the injection of the additional \$5 million, we will see an increase, I think it's fair to say - I think it's accurate to say, that we will see an increase in the amount of money that will go to arts organisations.

CHAIR - That said, which grant programs or funded organisations will receive that funding, that extra \$5 million?

Mr STEWART - The additional funding, so - I might pass to David in a moment to mention specific programs, but the approach that we will take, through you, minister, is to continue the programs that we currently have on offer, and in some cases we may be able to boost them, but off the back of some work that we're doing that the Premier mentioned in his state of the state address around a new creative industry strategy, which will bring together several strategic pieces of work that we've already done, or are currently underway; for

PUBLIC

example, the work we've done into the music sector to identify gaps where we might actually be able to create some new initiatives, and new opportunities for people to seek funding. So, we want to maintain, and potentially boost some of the existing programs, but we're also looking for opportunities where there might be gaps, through that work we're doing on the strategy, for new opportunities; but, in terms of the actual specific programs if, David, you may be able to provide some more detail.

Dr SUDMALIS - Certainly. Thanks Brett, and through you, minister, the 10 million creative industries support in this Budget is, as Brett has said, spread 5 million and 5 million across two outputs: 5 million in the arts output, and 5 million in the screen output.

CHAIR - We will come to that a bit later; let's talk about the arts output, 5 million.

Dr SUDMALIS - Okay. If I could just mention the phasing, because it's not equal in every year. The phasing of that is 1 million, 2 million, 3 million, and 4 million. Now in the first year it goes to screen, at 1 million, in the second year, screen and arts 1 million each, in the third year, \$1.5 million each, and in the fourth year 2.5 million to the arts, and \$1.5 million to screen. In the description in the Budget around this particular deliverable, you will notice that it talks about screen sector support and arts and heritage cultural support. Arts and heritage cultural support is the line, is the budget line for all of Arts Tasmania's creative, moveable cultural heritage competitive funds programs. The youth arts has a separate funding line, because that was a separate initiative previously. In other words, all of that \$5 million is going to competitive arts programs. The way that it's phased is that the most significant increase occurs at the beginning of the next multi-year cycle. It occurs at the beginning of the next multi-year cycle; that effectively means we will be able to have more arts organisations on multi-year funding, possibly at a different upper cap.

CHAIR - So, the Budget across this shows the arts industry development budget was at \$12.38 million in actual expenditure, with actual expenditure of only \$11 million. So, it's a \$1.37 million gap in the figure in the papers there. Can you explain where the underfund happened, or what explains that gap?

Dr SUDMALIS - Could you -

Mr ABETZ - Page number, or reference?

Dr SUDMALIS - Yes, please.

CHAIR - Sorry, I haven't got it -

Mr STEWART - Through you, minister, I think part of the confusion might be we reconcile off the revenue table, not the expense one, because it includes every fund source -

CHAIR - Right.

Mr STEWART - But we can attempt to answer the question based on the expense table, if that's what you're asking.

CHAIR - Well, maybe we look at that then. Now, I've got to find the right line, sorry I haven't -

PUBLIC

Mr STEWART - The appropriation table is 11.2.

Mr ABETZ - So that is page?

Mr STEWART - Page 261.

Mr ABETZ - Page 261.

CHAIR - That's the appropriation - you want us to look at the appropriation table, that's what you're saying?

Mr STEWART - Perhaps if you could point to the table that you were referencing earlier, Chair, and we can attempt to answer the question, sorry for the confusion.

CHAIR - That's all right. I didn't make a note on the paper, sorry, it's actually the expense table we're talking about where the estimated outcome, that's how much was spent, or expected to be spent.

Mr ABETZ - So what page is that, sorry?

CHAIR - Sorry, 266.

Mr ABETZ - 266. Yes. Mr Sudmalis has that in front of him now.

CHAIR - There was less expended than what was budgeted. I mean, I know it's not the final yet. We're not at the end of the financial year yet.

Mr ABETZ - Which one are we looking at, Chair?

CHAIR - Oh, I apologise, I was looking at the TMAG. My mistake I was looking at TMAG. TMAG underspent their budget at this point, is that it?

Mr ABETZ - And we handball over.

Mr STEWART - I can clarify that's the budget of 15119 as opposed to the estimated outcome of 14869. Would that be capital, Mary?

Ms MULCHAHY - It's a bit of capital spend. The capital and asset maintenance fund from two or three budgets ago. The procurements taken longer than anticipated, so we haven't spent in that year if that makes sense.

CHAIR - Timing issues, is that what you're telling me?

Ms MULCHAHY - Yes.

CHAIR - If we can just move to the question that's been raised. I will move on to Screen Tas, but one of the things that's been mentioned, I did lay this in a motion before our House very recently, was one that arts organisations have been raising this with the government for more than three years that the funding has not kept pace with inflation, employment costs, real cost production in a small regional economy.

PUBLIC

As I understand this Budget, correct me if I'm wrong here, Treasurer, the Budget contains no CPI and indexation for arts grants, Is that true? And if it is true, will the minister look at committing to automatic CPI indexation for multi-year arts agreements as we manage to get some indexation at least in the community sector?

Mr STEWART - Through you minister, the administered expense line doesn't have indexation for the payments that we make through on those multi-year agreements. We have been engaging with those partners and also with Treasury and we will continue to do so. That's a work in progress. Where we have been successful through the advocacy primarily from the former minister is to achieve the additional \$10 million over four years across those two outputs, which will assist us in being able to provide those multi-year agreements to organisations at levels consistent with or higher than what they've been in the past.

CHAIR - In terms of the multi-year funding agreements, is there an intention to move more to those? Because there are organisations that spend more time trying to prepare a budget submission than they do to create new content. They're demonstrated performance organisations. They're putting out good work every year, so are we going to look at that to make it a little bit more reliable for these organisations?

Mr STEWART - Through you minister, I will probably pass that one to David because I know he's been working in this area in terms of how we design that.

Dr SUDMALIS - Yes.

CHAIR - Good. I'm sure they will be really pleased to hear that, and I will pass that on as yes.

Ms O'CONNOR - The Salamanca Arts Centre - we haven't really had an opportunity to talk about that briefly. Just a quick check on the sort of maintenance costs and any government support for Salamanca Arts Centre, given that a very small amount of money that the centre had been given for its maintenance somewhere in the vicinity of \$30,000 or something has been withdrawn by government, I think that's correct. Is it?

Mr STEWART - The centre is owned by the Department of Natural Resources and Environment Tasmania. They oversee that lease and the maintenance arrangements. I guess the comment that we can make is that the centre benefits from a peppercorn rent in terms of through that lease arrangement and then effectively earn in excess of \$1 million per annum on further renting out subleasing parts of the centre.

Although their direct funding is limited, they do benefit from that arrangement significantly. David, I don't know if you had any further comments in relation to the Salamanca Arts Centre?

Dr SUDMALIS - Two things - and through you, minister - to clarify, it is an NRE and SAC matter in terms of the operation of the lease. I'm not aware of any changes to the ongoing nature of that lease, but that's a question for NRE.

As for the other government support for the Salamanca Arts Centre, recent years have seen SAC, in return for its \$1 per annum rent, return between \$1 and \$1.1 million per year in

PUBLIC

revenue and part of that does go towards the maintenance of the site. They generate income and portion that to their arts programming and the maintenance of the facility.

Ms O'CONNOR - Has there been a cut, though, to a small grant that was given to SAC for heritage maintenance?

Dr SUDMALIS - Regarding maintenance, the last piece of maintenance of which I'm aware is the lift at SAC, that previous minister Ogilvie made a forceful intercession and found money in order to remedy that particular matter.

CHAIR - We will move on to screen.

Ms GLADE-WRIGHT - The screen sector are aware that there's been a cultural -

Mr ABETZ - Excuse me, before you get started there's a further -

Mr STEWART - Yes, apologies, and through you, minister, I just wanted to correct the record: the earlier question we had on the difference between the TMAG output in terms of budget and actuals, the reason for that wasn't around infrastructure as previously indicated. There's an allocation within TMAG's budget to fund the operations of the Tasmanian Holocaust Education Centre, which was a commitment previously made in partnership with the Commonwealth government in 2022, I think, or 2021. There was an allocation of \$250,000 a year to support the operations of that centre. The centre hasn't been established yet, so that's been rolled forward.

CHAIR - Thank you. Good.

Mr STEWART - Apologies for -

CHAIR - That's alright, just conscious of timing.

Output Group 5 - Cultural and Tourism Development

5.3 Screen Industry Development

Ms GLADE-WRIGHT - The screen sector is aware that there has been a cultural review into Screen Tasmania. Can you please confirm if a cultural review has taken place?

Mr STEWART - I can answer that one.

Mr ABETZ - Yes. Good.

Mr STEWART - Thanks minister, and through you. Yes, there's a relatively, I wouldn't call it routine, but the areas within - certainly within my space - have undertaken different types of reviews from time to time. Because of feedback from the Screen Tasmania expert advisory group, who make the independent decisions around where investment decisions are made into certain projects, feedback from the sector more generally and my own observations, having taken on this role 18 months ago, it was decided that the small Screen team would benefit from a cultural review. That review is still underway. What we're hoping to achieve is a review on

PUBLIC

what works well, what could be improved and what needs to be improved, potentially significantly, so that we can provide as good a service that we can to that sector.

Ms GLADE-WRIGHT - When will the review conclude and will there be recommendations that come out of it?

Mr STEWART -The review's internal, through you, minister. It's ongoing. We're currently working with the staff around the outcomes of that review very openly. I don't have a date but I suspect it will be in the next six months.

Ms GLADE-WRIGHT - Is that something we can get hold of or it's internal?

CHAIR - Is it?

Mr STEWART - I might have to take that one on notice.

Ms GLADE-WRIGHT - Okay.

CHAIR - Are there any other questions for screen? Just conscious of time. Anything on grants and subsidies or capital investment? We sort of covered a bit on that; there's not much in capital investment anyway. That'd be the TMAG money would it - the capital investment?

Well, thanks, minister. We will close this off as we need to go to your portfolio of digital government and information communications technology. Thank you to your team.

The witnesses withdrew.

The committee suspended from 5.19 p.m. to 5.23 p.m.

Innovation, Science and the Digital Economy

CHAIR - Thanks, minister. We have a very pressed timeline I appreciate that. So, if you could introduce the people at your table and I don't know if you want to make any opening comments or go straight -

Mr ABETZ - A very brief one because we've got some breaking news, but on my right is Dr Justin Thurley, chief information officer, Department of Premier and Cabinet. To my immediate left is Mike Mogridge, deputy secretary, Economic Growth, Department of State Growth and on his left is Mat Healey, deputy secretary, Strategy and Delivery, Department of Premier and Cabinet.

CHAIR - And the breaking news.

Mr ABETZ - The breaking news is that it's amazing what happens when there's a new minister appointed, but I can't claim credit for this in fairness. Our Firmus and SUBCO, a subsea cable provider, have announced a new subsea cable investment connecting Tasmania to Sydney and Melbourne. Firmus is a private business operating in Tasmania. It pays commercial

PUBLIC

rates and meets the same regulatory expectations as any other company. It is not government-owned, it's not subsidised, it's a commercial operator working within established rules. All Firmus projects are subject to Tasmania's planning laws and approval processes. There are strong independent regulatory systems in place, and Firmus is required to comply with them just like any other proponent. This goes on for a while, but I think it's a 50 -

Mr MOGRIDGE - 60.

Mr ABETZ - Sorry, \$60 million project.

Mr MOGRIDGE - Sorry, 60 terabits per second, through you, minister.

Mr ABETZ - 60, but the cost.

CHAIR - So competing with Marinus Link. Is it competing with Marinus Link?

Mr MOGRIDGE - Discrete to, sorry.

Mr ABETZ - No, no you go.

Mr MOGRIDGE - Discrete to Marinus Link, this is a brand new cable so Marinus Link will still provide capacity, but this will provide significant additional capacity and also resilience in relation to Tasmania having alternative routes and a direct linkage into New South Wales, which will provide profound resilience for Tasmania.

Ms LOVELL - Forgive my ignorance. It's an energy cable?

CHAIR - No, data cable. Just data, but Marinus Link has a big data cable with it as well.

Mr ABETZ - All privately funded.

Ms LOVELL - On that announcement, on that breaking news, it's hard to ask questions about it without a lot of detail. They've announced they're intending to proceed with this project? They'll still have to go through all the normal approvals and -

Mr ABETZ - I would assume that that is the case.

Ms THOMAS - It hasn't just appeared there overnight.

Mr ABETZ - No.

Ms LOVELL - That's what I'm wondering. It's at the stage of them announcing their intention to proceed with this project. Is that correct?

Mr ABETZ - It's the announcement of a new subsea cable investment connecting Tasmania.

CHAIR - What's the timeline? Do we know?

Mr ABETZ - I don't have that detail. It's breaking news and none of the -

PUBLIC

Dr THURLEY - I do, through you, minister, I believe they're intending to start the work in 2027.

Ms LOVELL - Subject to all of the approvals and things, presumably?

Dr THURLEY - Yes.

Ms LOVELL - Okay. I was going to move on to something else, but if anyone's got any questions on the breaking news?

Ms THOMAS - What's the catch? They've just decided out of the goodness of their heart.

Mr ABETZ - What a welcome to a private investment. There is no catch. Undoubtedly, they've made a business decision that an investment of this nature will undoubtedly provide a return to them, I would imagine, which is indicative of some degree of confidence in matters Tasmanian, which -

Ms O'CONNOR - Or they think this government's a pushover for any development at any cost, but yes, it could be either.

Mr ABETZ - But there is, as I indicated to you, no cost to the Tasmanian taxpayer. All fully privately funded.

Ms THOMAS - Forgive me for being cynical.

Output Group 3 – Community and Government Service Delivery

3.1 Digital Government and Information and Communications Technology (ICT) - Strategy, Policy and Service Delivery

Ms LOVELL - Minister, thank you. I have some questions about the Digital Tasmania strategy and the digital inclusion framework. How much funding has been allocated to the implementation of this strategy in the Budget?

Mr ABETZ - It's a framework document that does not have funding connected to it. Thank you, Dr Thurley.

Ms LOVELL - Are there measurable outcomes that are expected to be delivered from the framework and the strategy?

Mr ABETZ - Seeing that Dr Thurley has the framework in front of him, he might be able to assist.

Dr THURLEY - I certainly can, through you, minister, just give me a second to get my best possible version of that. The Digital Tasmania strategy sets out a vision for the Tasmanian economy, business and community. It's looking for where communities, business, and government can confidently participate and thrive in a rapidly changing digital world. We've crafted this framework in terms of a range of priorities, outcomes and focus areas. The main priorities that we have lined up are: inclusion and access; skills and capabilities; trust, safety, and transparency; and modern connected digital services.

PUBLIC

Ms LOVELL - What specifically will you be measuring in terms of those goals, I suppose?

Dr THURLEY - Through you, minister, we've identified outcomes for those particular priorities. In relation to inclusion and access, we're looking for - so Tasmanians can access and confidently use digital technologies and services. For skills and capabilities, we're looking for - Tasmanians that have strong digital skills and capabilities, in terms of trust, safety and transparency, we're looking for digital systems that are trusted, safe and transparent.

Ms LOVELL - Sorry to cut you off, but I'm just conscious of the time. How will you measure those things?

Dr THURLEY - So, we would measure them through the range of -

Mr ABETZ - Yes, quickly, this framework is publicly available?

Dr THURLEY - Yes, it is publicly available.

Mr ABETZ - That's page 15 that Dr Thurley's referring to.

Ms LOVELL - Yes, so, specifically what I'm asking is really not, I understand, in the framework, which is how will those outcomes be measured. Because it's all well and good to say that the vision is for a Tasmania that's, you know, can participate online, what have you. But, how will you know that that's happening?

Dr THURLEY - Yep, so, the idea is that we identify a range of focus areas. Those focus areas would be connected to an action plan and action plans, and those plans would have either KPIs or milestones connected to them to demonstrate that those outcomes are being met.

Ms LOVELL - Have they been developed yet?

Dr THURLEY - Not all of them, but we do have some components already in play.

Ms LOVELL - Are they publicly available?

Dr THURLEY - It certainly is in terms of the strategy as it reads at the moment, and as we update the strategy we'll be adding to the action plans that we produce in time.

Ms LOVELL - Just one further question on that. Minister, will the government commit that essential services will remain available by phone, paper and in-person channels, not only digitally available through websites, apps or QR codes?

Mr ABETZ - Look, I would have to take that on notice as I dare say it wouldn't depend on the particular service, but -

Ms LOVELL - Okay. Happy to take that on notice.

Ms O'CONNOR - Minister, earlier today the acting secretary of State Growth confirmed that there are external advisers advising DPAC on the AI Accelerator project. Who are those external advisers?

PUBLIC

Mr ABETZ - Mr Healey?

Mr HEALEY - So, in terms of the AI Accelerator, firstly, we have engaged Chris Eccles on the broader efficiency.

Ms O'CONNOR - Chris Eccles?

Mr HEALEY - Former secretary of Premier and Cabinet in South Australia, New South Wales and Victoria. He's providing support to the government and identifying the board efficiency and productivity agenda. One part of that includes the AI and digital on the modernisation of service delivery broadly. As we move into the development of the AI Accelerator, we certainly will partner with other people in the private sector, but there are no identified consultants engaged in the development of that capability at this stage.

Ms O'CONNOR - Are there any external - Mr Gregory was quite clear, he did use the term 'advisers', it was plural. Are there any private entities advising DPAC on the AI Accelerator project?

Mr HEALEY - So, the only other relationship that we have with a private sector entity is DPAC is working with Intuit, a local company, on trying to build capability in the department around the use of AI. We're running some small trials with staff across the department, and they have considered the role of the AI Accelerator just as part of that relationship, but they're not contracted to do so.

Ms O'CONNOR - Okay. The secretary's board, as we understand it, is developing an AI policy. How progressed is that AI policy and what does it contain to date?

Dr THURLEY - So, we've been through a long-term consultation process in developing a new policy framework for artificial intelligence use in government, or responsible use of artificial intelligence in government. That is at its final stages. It's about to be presented forward for endorsement and implementation within government. We're just waiting on the final clearances et cetera.

Ms O'CONNOR - Thank you. Can I ask who was consulted in this extensive process?

Dr THURLEY - We've undertaken, look, it's been quite a long journey, it's been untaken through just about every agency in government with various stakeholders at various levels. We've consulted with external entities, other jurisdictions in particular, and we've been working with the Commonwealth government on a number of common projects, so, we've used a lot of the input from that. We've also been working with some other governments to provide input on that. They've developed policy and strategy around their AI use and their responsible use, particularly around the ethical behaviour aspects of it. We've also consulted with advisories that we have on retainers that we use for this type of work as well. We've also consulted with industry groups within Tasmania, in particular the two main sort of digital groups in ACS, and we also consulted with TasICT, and we've actually had a few other groups that we've worked with as well.

Ms O'CONNOR - Any conversation with Civil Liberties Tasmania, for example?

Dr THURLEY - Civil Liberties Tasmania? No, not to my knowledge.

PUBLIC

Ms O'CONNOR - Unfortunate. And, so, when is the AI policy expected to be finalised and when will it be made public.

Dr THURLEY - It's a matter of getting through to the Secretaries' Board of the Tasmanian government and being endorsed at that stage. We don't know; they may not endorse it, but we assume that we will have a passage along those lines.

Ms O'CONNOR - To the second part of my question, are you indicating that it's the secretaries who will approve the AI policy and not Cabinet?

Dr THURLEY - Yes, that is the case.

Ms O'CONNOR - Does that make you comfortable, minister? Because someone's going to be accountable if this AI policy is not the right policy.

Mr ABETZ - And we'll have all the secretaries to blame.

Ms O'CONNOR - You can't do that, can you?

Mr ABETZ - I would have to take that question on notice. I haven't given consideration to this matter previously.

Ms O'CONNOR - The government 18 months ago promised to develop a register for artificial intelligence initiatives, but that seems to have fallen by the wayside. What's happened to the AI initiatives register?

Dr THURLEY - In relation to the AI register and its inclusion in wording in the original AI guidance that we developed at the end of 2024, there is never an intention to make a transparency document. The idea was to produce this document to use for collaborative and knowledge-sharing. Various agencies would have versions of initiative registers and documents like that, but we didn't intend to use it in the sense that it's been portrayed in recent times through media or elsewhere.

Ms O'CONNOR - No one corrected that record despite the portrayal.

Dr THURLEY - Yes, and it is actually if you read into the actual guidelines, especially in that section, recommendation 7, that says, 'this is what will be used for'. Notwithstanding that, one of the key things that we were doing as part of our roadmap moving forward was to understand at what stage do we move from guidance to policy. We all felt that policy and a framework for policy was necessary and there was an agreement on that. Moving to that, we identified very quickly that AI registers were being developed as part of a transparency framework, which we completely agree with, and so did the working group that developed the policy. Coming into the policy, you'll see that the transparency component and the registry component of it will be something that is the feature of that policy.

Ms O'CONNOR - Just to backtrack to the second part of the question, which wasn't answered earlier. Will the AI policy, minister, be a public document?

PUBLIC

Dr THURLEY - Absolutely, we would expect to put that document publicly on our website.

Ms O'CONNOR - I'm just struggling to understand how in a Westminster parliamentary system it would be a group of unelected bureaucrats who would approve a policy around the use of artificial intelligence that will impact on the lives and the data of Tasmanians, rather than it being something that goes to Cabinet, where each minister whose secretary is answerable to them, takes responsibility for approving that policy.

Mr ABETZ - That is why I've taken that question on notice previously. Up until you asked the question, I had not given consideration to that matter.

Ms O'CONNOR - You would agree, minister, that in a Westminster parliamentary democracy, the policy of this potential consequence is something that should receive Cabinet attention.

Mr ABETZ - On the face of it, there is merit in what you're saying, but I would like some more time to reflect and, hence, taking it on notice.

Ms O'CONNOR - Thank you. We'll come back to

CHAIR - Thank you very much for appearing before the Estimates committee. We think it's really important the EPA appears independently from the minister, your own independent statutory authority. Can I invite you to introduce yourself and the team, and then we will go straight, unless you want to make some opening comments?

Ms MURDOCH - Only, and because learning from last year, new process, I have only a little statement to just frame what we are and that's it.

CHAIR - That would be great and then go straight to questions.

Ms O'CONNOR - Nice and brief would be great.

Ms MURDOCH - Trying to be.

CHAIR - Thank you.

Ms MURDOCH - Thank you for having us here today, the EPA is one of Tasmania's environment -

CHAIR - Just introduce yourselves at the table for *Hansard*, please.

Ms MURDOCH - Catherine Murdoch, CEO and director of the EPA. To my left is Daryl Cook, director, Finfish Compliance, Cindy Ong, director of Environmental Regulation, and Amanda Locatelli, director of Environmental Assessment.

CHAIR - I'm just checking you got the third one.

Can you just pull the microphone down, because you have quite a soft voice.

PUBLIC

Ms ONG - Cindy Ong, director of Environmental Regulation.

CHAIR - Thank you.

Ms LOCATELLI - Amanda Locatelli, Director of Environmental Assessment.

CHAIR - Thank you, thanks Catherine.

Ms MURDOCH - The EPA is one of Tasmania's environmental regulators and is responsible for administering the *Environmental Management and Pollution Control Act*, the *Litter Act*, and the *Marine-related Incidents Act* and has a duty to enforce compliance and identify any offences under these acts. The EPA does not establish government policy or legislation. The EPA has 124 staff to deliver on our responsibilities under this legislative framework across the areas of environmental assessments, air quality, water quality, noise management, industrial regulation, wastewater, contaminated land, fish farming and waste management, environmental investigations, and incident response.

The work undertaken across the EPA is underpinned by the best available science and information, evidentiary decision-making principles, and professional rigour. The depth of the science expertise within the EPA is substantial. The majority of EPA staff have qualified with a bachelor's degree or higher in science and environmental fields across all divisions. Over 110 individual bachelor's degrees and over 20 higher degrees are held by staff across the EPA.

What I really want to say today as well is the EPA is focused on transparency. I understand that is important for us to show how and why we make decisions. I also understand that it is important to provide factually correct information to the community. To this end, the EPA is continuing to identify opportunities for active and routine disclosure. Over the last 12 months, we have released for the first time our environmental infringement and warning notices annually. six monthly oxygen monitoring results from Macquarie Harbour, quarterly releases of monthly salmon mortality data, salmon waste management plans, monitoring results updates for antibody residue monitoring, notifications for all dosing events, including start date, duration, and maps which are published in real time, monitoring schedules for antibiotic residue monitoring published in real time, and monitoring reports for antibody residue monitoring published within a three-month timeframe of completion of dosing.

We will continue to actively look for opportunities to release information that is factually correct and complies with the requirements of relevant legislation. For instance, we are now also in the process of implementing Aquarius, a new water data information management system, which will enable us to have a live portal where all our water-related data and monitoring results can be viewed publicly.

Science, transparency, and independence is at the heart of what the EPA stands for, and I look forward to answering your questions.

Ms O'CONNOR - Thank you, Chair. Thanks, Catherine. When we had Macquarie Point Development Corporation in yesterday and I asked the CEO, Ms Beach, about the volume of contaminated materials on the Macquarie Point site. She indicated that it was about 100,000 cubic metres and that seems to be somewhat less than we were told at the Estimates table last year. Last year we were told 130,000 cubic metres by Ms Beach and then you came

PUBLIC

in later and said you thought it was in the range of 130,000 to 220,000 tonnes. What is the EPA's understanding of the volume of contaminated materials on the Macquarie Point site?

Ms MURDOCH - The figures I will go through just for clarity were provided to us in May 2025 and that is what we are still working off, Ms O'Connor. To be clear, so I don't confuse numbers, level 2 versus level 3, or would you like a combined total?

Ms O'CONNOR - It was the combined total. We didn't get into the levels yesterday with Ms Beach, it was just the volume.

Ms MURDOCH - The combined total we have is - and I have it in tonnes and cubic metres this year, so we don't get confused - 298,000 tonnes or 175,000 cubic metres. They're based on May 2025 figures. I'm not aware that we've been given any updated figures from Macquarie Point. They may have new figures that they're presenting to us as part of our ongoing conversations, but they're the figures we have stipulating May 2025.

Ms O'CONNOR - Okay, so in November of last year, despite the fact that this information was available to the EPA in May of 2025, as we're told, in November last year, we were told it was somewhere between 130,000 and 220,000 tonnes. There's a distinct numerical difference. I have the *Hansard* here from last November.

Ms MURDOCH - These are the figures that the team has provided to me. I think we were talking in tonnes, and we did have confusion around whether or not car parks or things were in as well, I understand, but these are the correct figures that I have that we're currently on the record as saying.

Ms O'CONNOR - When was the last time that the EPA engaged in a conversation with MPDC about the volume of contaminated soils on the site?

Ms MURDOCH - My team meets actually weekly with MPDC, so there's a lot of regulatory effort in this space. I have a specialist contaminated lands officer who is specifically working on this project, so these figures have been provided to me by that person; but they meet weekly, are going through all the environmental management plans and requirements on site, and understanding our regulatory requirements that I need to fulfil my functions as a director on site.

Ms O'CONNOR - I'm still a bit baffled by the three different sets of numbers here. There's a set of numbers we were given last November by yourself; there's the number that we were given by Ms Beach yesterday, which is substantially less than 175,000 cubic metres. What we were told was that there's 100,000 cubic metres of fill that will need to be treated or dealt with on site, and yet it's a substantially larger volume that we're told about today. Moving on from that, because it's probably not going to be resolved by you at this table and I don't want to be unfair to you at all, Ms Murdoch, I really, really respect the work of the EPA; has the EPA been informed when it will receive the Construction Environmental Management Plan?

Ms MURDOCH - We haven't been informed when we will get it, but I am absolutely sure of my obligations under the order to approve that, and that we have a month to. My team is actively working with Macquarie Point so that they do understand their obligations of what needs to come in that, and I will assess that in accordance with the requirements of the order. I don't yet know when it's coming, but we understand the structures around what it needs to do.

PUBLIC

Ms O'CONNOR - So, we were also told yesterday that some of the bulk earthworks which will be undertaken by Hazell Bros are scheduled to start next month, and yet the EPA doesn't have - I guess what sort of documentation does the EPA have, or assurance from MPDC about how those site earthworks will be undertaken?

Ms MURDOCH - Absolutely. So I presume those works are in accordance with the preparatory works that we've already approved, or have put forward. We're waiting to cover those works. A site environmental management plan is being developed and is required, and those works cannot start until I approve that site environmental management plan. For preparatory works, that is the process that needs to be done, and I'm expecting that plan imminently, I think, over the next coming weeks. Do we have some figures?

Ms O'CONNOR - It was indicated to us that not all of the bulk earthworks would be considered site preparatory works under the Macquarie Point order. What does the EPA understand the other bulk earthworks would fall under and how they be managed?

Ms MURDOCH - So, stage 2 bulk earthworks - and I might pass to Cindy in case she's got some additional - but stage 2 bulk earthworks are the major - and it depends what we're calling bulk earthworks, I have to say, but that is under stage 2. Stage 1 is the preparatory, stage 2 is the bulk works under the order, so -

Ms ONG - I don't really have any additional detail to add to that.

Ms MURDOCH - If we head to stage 2 and bulk earthworks, I can say I understand the position to be that the site environmental management plan will cover stage 1 preparatory works.

Ms O'CONNOR - You haven't received that plan yet?

Ms MURDOCH - No. We've had a lot of input into it. It's in its final stages, so I'm comfortable that the controls in that, and around contamination, are right and being informed, and also things such as protocols around interception, unexpected groundwater occurrence and things like that. So, those environmental conditions will be managed there.

Ms O'CONNOR - Okay. Well, let's just drill into that a little bit: what makes you comfortable about how contamination risks will be dealt with onsite?

Ms MURDOCH - Yes. Absolutely the CEMP has to handle that, and whether or not it's - and Macquarie Point has certainly put forward some indication that they'd like to treat as much as they can, and reuse appropriately onsite if appropriate.

Ms O'CONNOR - What does treat mean, in terms of soil that contains asbestos, lead, potential chemicals of concern, petrochemicals and the like?

Ms MURDOCH - There's various technologies that can do that and I think it's called cute, isn't it to - what does cute stand for? There is methodology in this space, and my contaminated soil expert's -

Ms ONG - Clean to extent practicable.

PUBLIC

Ms MURDOCH - Clean to the extent practical is within the industry a standard to which things can be treated. So, depending on - and that's what will need to happen - is the assessment of those soils, what is that? But I do understand there are industry standards for that, Ms O'Connor. What I understand, if it can't be treated, then, yes, it will have to be disposed, and, as we know, and, as we've said on the record, what that amount - that is up to Macquarie Point as they're excavating to understand their strategies around that to put to us, and for them to manage across the 12-monthly cycle of excavations.

Ms O'CONNOR - Okay, thank you. If you could just remind me, because I don't have EMPCA in front of me, the level 1 contaminants are the most contaminated?

Ms MURDOCH - Least.

Ms O'CONNOR - The least: thank you very much.

Ms MURDOCH - Level 3 is the most.

Ms O'CONNOR - Of the level - what is the EPA's understanding of the volume of level 3 contaminants.

Ms MURDOCH - Level 3 contaminants across all three stages, as I understand, [inaudible] I'm saying with the information from May 2025, is 17,000 cubic metres.

Ms O'CONNOR - 17,000 cubic metres, and so what is the EPA's expectation about precisely how that material will be dealt with from excavation to storage to disposal?

Ms MURDOCH - I understand around this one, there's opportunities for disposal and, as we know, Copping is able to take 45,000 cubic metres - tonnes, actually, so it's more, actually, 45,000 tonnes if it was all to go to landfill, so that space is there. I do understand that some of the level 3 may be able to be treated, 8000 cubic metres is potentially able to be treated onsite, so that takes that down.

Ms O'CONNOR - What does that mean? How do you treat a large volume of material that will contain asbestos, lead, petrochemicals and other potential chemicals of concern?

Ms ONG - If it's contaminants that can volatilise and go into the air, sometimes treatments known as land farming - so it can sit there and be turned, and the -

Ms O'CONNOR - What, is it sealed?

Ms ONG - Sealed?

Ms O'CONNOR - If it's something that could be blown about by the wind and affect the health of the people of the city of Hobart, what does that mean?

Ms MURDOCH - Yes. Absolutely.

Ms ONG - Yes. So that needs to be done in a controlled way.

PUBLIC

Ms O'CONNOR - What's that, sorry?

Ms MURDOCH - It's in a controlled way in a controlled environment.

Ms O'CONNOR - But what is that? Sorry, I'm trying to understand. What do you do? Do you put a tarp over it? Do you dig a big hole and seal it with concrete? What does that mean?

Ms MURDOCH - I'm not going to pretend to be a technical expert in this, but my people are, and there are set, standard industry practices for this that -

Ms O'CONNOR - Yes, but what are they?

Ms MURDOCH - As we're saying, that one, I presume it will be in a contained - well, I'm not going to presume because I am not going to go into hypotheticals.

Ms O'CONNOR - I think we should be careful about presuming something which has a serious human health risk.

Ms THOMAS - They haven't got a plan yet, I think.

Ms MURDOCH - Well, no.

Ms O'CONNOR - But there will be industry standards about how you deal with it.

Ms MURDOCH - So just to be really clear: they don't have a CEMP in place, right? For the preparatory works they do have, and the site environmental management plan will cover off on some of these issues, so I'm about to see these. My soil expert is telling me that there is potentially 8000 -

Ms ONG - 300.

Ms MURDOCH - 300 cubic metres of level 3 in the preparatory works, which he is telling me can potentially be treated onsite on the approval of the appropriate technology and approach. I can take that question on notice and bring you back information.

Ms O'CONNOR - That would be great.

Ms MURDOCH - But I'm comfortable, my specialist - he's on this, pretty much this is his job, he knows what he's doing, he's an expert in contaminated - and he's been on this site for many, many years. So happy to take that as a question on notice about -

CHAIR - We will write to you with that, Catherine, yes.

Ms O'CONNOR - It needs to be really clearly understood what are the treatment methods for heavily contaminated soils onsite that pose an established public health risk.

Ms MURDOCH - Yes, and very happy to provide that information.

CHAIR - But not all contaminated soils can be treated onsite.

PUBLIC

Ms MURDOCH - Absolutely not.

CHAIR - It is only those that can be treated on site.

Ms MURDOCH - And determining what they are needs to be as part of that plan and it would be that triaging approach to doing that.

Ms O'CONNOR - Okay, and is there any update. Last year, Ms Beach said that, of the soil there, level 1 to level 3, 72,000 tonnes have been removed or beneficially reused. I'm glad it's not in my garden. There have been 2.3 million litres of contaminated groundwater removed, over 2000 soil samples taken, 175 groundwater wells, 700 bore sites for testing, 1400 soil samples. What's the EPA's understanding of what's been treated onsite or removed from the site to date?

Ms MURDOCH - Let's just remember that this site has been in remediation since 2013, as I understand. All of those works are included in all of that. All of this isn't just about the stadium project. It has been an industrial site that has been remediated since 2013. A lot of those works I would expect would have been in those. This is a long time on this site and that we have been involved in that and because it was my experts that have been involved in a lot of those processes.

Ms O'CONNOR - OK, and there is another level, isn't it? There's a level 4 contaminated soil?

Ms MURDOCH - Yes.

Ms O'CONNOR - The most contaminated possible soils. Have any of them been identified on the Macquarie Point site?

Ms MURDOCH - Not that I'm aware of, no.

Ms O'CONNOR - Alright, thank you. When we put a question on notice for you, it'll be about how the soils are expected to be excavated, treated and stored on site, and those that are disposed of, how they'll be disposed of and where.

Ms MURDOCH - Okay, but what I thought we were also clarifying is how do you treat a level 3 soil. What are some of the processes that can be done to treat that down to a level 2. That's what I heard in your question as well, so, to provide that information to you.

CHAIR - We will write to you.

Ms O'CONNOR - In practical terms, once the EPA receives the Construction Environmental Management Plan and then there's further preparatory works can be undertaken, what is the EPA's onsite role?

Ms MURDOCH - We're obviously a regulator and our regulatory role was not taken away under the order, as we know. Like I said, we're meeting at this point in time weekly with MPDC, the team. That team will have absolute auditing onsite inspection functions and that will continue and, as we know, most of our presence needs to be around the preparatory works

PUBLIC

and the bulk excavation. That is where most of our environmental involvement is. Once it's up into construction, the main environmental aspects of risk have gone. That's where our presence absolutely has to be, but the team will be there. There will be inspections. We'll be ensuring compliance with our conditions as outlined in the order.

Ms O'CONNOR - Can I just understand how during a bulk excavation process, when you have excavators and things like that in there digging up contaminated soils, how do you mitigate against the risk of airborne dispersal of those contaminants during excavation, not storage?

Ms MURDOCH - Having been on lots of construction sites, and I have, there are various mechanisms and, obviously, depending on what you're dealing with, and this is what we would expect that when we get the CEMP that there will be different orders of what is the contamination, what is the level, what is the soil. There are different methods in regard to wetting down. If it's an airborne, that there's dust, if it's a risk that those contaminants will get into groundwater, you need to have groundwater interception plans in place. You need to have soil erosion control. They are all the things that we will be looking for and to ensure those measures onsite. It's your stockpile management, it's like, 'Are they covered, are they not, are they open to the rain?' It's understanding what the dispersal mechanisms for the actual contaminant is and that soil. I expect the CEMP to tell us what are the soil types we're dealing with; what are the contaminant sites; how does that all come together to mitigate these risks. And that's what we'll be expecting to see in the CEMP.

Ms O'CONNOR - In terms of mitigating that public health risk to the greatest extent that it's possible to do so, it's quite a busy area of Hobart. You have accommodation across Evans Street and on Davey Street with the Grand Chancellor. You have quite a bit of foot traffic through there. How is that managed during works?

Ms MURDOCH - That'll have to be a site management traffic plan, and that's not something I do regulate, but I would expect a traffic management plan will absolutely intrinsically have to be approved by the Hobart City Council and whoever the relevant regulators are in that space.

Ms O'CONNOR - Finally on this. So, if the construction environmental management plan comes to the EPA - I note what you said earlier about being in regular conversation with the MPDC, so, presumably they'll present something to you which has already been negotiated. But the EPA wouldn't, simply because of those negotiations, sort of rubber-stamp a Construction Environmental Management Plan. We can hopefully count on that.

Ms MURDOCH - Can't say I will ever rubber-stamp anything, Cassy, and I can promise that any decisions that I make will be based on contemporary science, evidentiary decision-making and transparent. I can absolutely guarantee that I will be doing that every day in my job. So, I will not be rubber-stamping anything. We will be looking at this, I will confer with my experts about 'does this adequately manage the risk, are all the risks identified and are we happy to approve this document'. It will not be approved if it does not manage the risks of that site.

Ms O'CONNOR - Okay, I'm happy to move on from that.

CHAIR - Yeah, Clare had one. Did you want?

PUBLIC

Ms GLADE-WRIGHT - I'm interested in your antibiotic residue monitoring schedule. It says on your website that it's new. Can you just tell us about when it started and how frequently you'll be testing for antibiotic residues?

Ms MURDOCH - Okay, so, just to clarify, the antibiotic residue monitoring programs were what my scientific team in the finfish science developed up for the florfenicol treatments. So, antibody residue monitoring programs for every treatment were developed, and that's for the first time we've actually put those up on the website. So, any therapeutic treatment in finfish in the state will have an antibiotic residue monitoring program to it, and we will make that publicly available as to what's being monitored for. Does that make sense?

Ms GLADE-WRIGHT - And so how frequently will you be testing for the residues?

Ms MURDOCH - We only do it when a treatment is on, and scientifically they vary depending on the therapeutant. So, for florfenicol, which we've done quite a few of them, it was to establish a monitoring program which was prior to treatment, during treatment and after treatment for testing for that actual antibiotic in the water.

Ms GLADE-WRIGHT - So, not in the sediments.

Ms MURDOCH - In the sediments as well. So, it was in the sediments, in the water and for health, because we were helping out with their health monitoring for human health, it was wild fish. But, from an environmental perspective, we're interested in water and sediments.

Ms GLADE-WRIGHT - So, does the monitoring incorporate testing for antimicrobial resistance of bacteria, because that's really where I'm trying to get to.

Ms MURDOCH - Gotcha. So, in regards to that we realised, obviously, and when florfenicol came about, that in concert with our discussions with our colleagues at Public Health, that it was a very contemporary health matter that needed to be considered. So, before any florfenicol treatments occurred, we designed a program in consultation with Health and IMAS to take samples prior to, during and after that treatment event. What I can tell you is, and I'll just be quite specific as to what we're doing, so, those samples that have been collected, the overarching objective of the research that's going to be undertaken in that space - and, sorry, this is just what the scientists have told me - this is to elucidate any shifts in the benthic microbiomes and identify phenotypic and genotypic evidence of antimicrobial resistance at salmon leases associated with the use of antibiotics.

Ms O'CONNOR - Just at the leases, or what distance from the leases?

Ms MURDOCH - We're really in the stages of designing that, and I think - look all of us at this table know that antimicrobial is going to be long-term research program - so I think what we've done is, what the research questions that we would like to answer probably will be more than just this research, these samples that have been taken. It will be ongoing. So, we've established across Public Health, Bio-Security, ourselves, IMAS and potentially veterinarians what an ongoing research program could be. But I think it's important to know because it's a really good point for us to clarify. It was like, 'you didn't do antimicrobial resistance?' No, we absolutely knew that needed to be done and I will be honest, Daryl came to me and went, 'I think we have got to do this', and we went out and did the sampling. Once that research is

PUBLIC

finished - and we will be looking for external funds to increase what we can do in this area - but importantly, understanding what our role is like in this space. I know it's complex. We always go, but obviously, Public Health is responsible for human health antimicrobial resistance. Obviously, NRE Tasmania, because of Biosecurity in Tasmania and the Chief Veterinary Officer there, they have carriage of animal health, safety of primary produce, but it's all coming together collectively. To do research and understand collectively what we need to do - that's where we're at, if that makes sense.

Ms GLADE-WRIGHT - Yes, it's really concerning what's happened in Chile. There's measurable increases in antimicrobial resistance in the surrounding marine environment around the salmon farms. With that knowledge, what are your thoughts on that?

Ms MURDOCH - Yes and I think again, it's where context is important and numbers can be a bit dangerous if out of context as well. And if I'm getting it wrong, step in for me. But importantly, this study in Chile is being - I'm quoting, I know, Dr Raymond Bannister might have. But remember, the concentrations in that study are 250 times higher than anything we detected over the summer. It's really important to understand the science behind some of that. The sites we're talking about in Chile where this piece of research that people are absolutely talking about, the amount of florfenicol used and the results in the water were at or above concentrations 250 times higher than the -

Ms O'CONNOR - They've been doing it for longer.

Ms MURDOCH - But, just because of how fast -

Mr COOK - They've been using florfenicol for a lot longer, is that what you mean?

Ms O'CONNOR - Much longer.

Ms MURDOCH - Yes, but it still, as we know, the florfenicol how it goes away.

CHAIR - What's its half-life?

Ms MURDOCH - Excuse me, half-life?

Mr COOK - Half-life, 21 days - depends on what we're talking about. Yes, 21 days.

Ms O'CONNOR - It doesn't stop being residually impactful on biota at 21 days.

Mr COOK - Potentially, yes, so I think the important -

CHAIR - It's half-life is 21 days.

Ms O'CONNOR - Yes, but what it breaks down into still has an impact on marine ecology.

Ms MURDOCH - Amines still go - oh I don't want to start talking to, without making sure I'm not stuffing up Raymond Bannister's science.

PUBLIC

Mr COOK - I thought the important point here is, once we start talking about a Chilean paper, there are multiples and we have to be careful about which one we might be talking about. We may express some caution around taking those results.

Ms MURDOCH - Exactly.

Mr COOK - The important point I think the CEO is trying to make here is that we very much acknowledge this needs further study. We have collected a lot of samples on transects leading out from the treated pens and at untreated leases and at reference sites and all over, so we have the data already. Sorry, have the samples already, and we're finalising the actual research program to pursue those questions.

Ms GLADE-WRIGHT - I've obviously just come out of a campaign period and for the people down in the Channel, it's a really big concern, and you can really hear in people's stories how they're not wanting to go swimming over summer.

Ms O'CONNOR - Go fishing.

Ms GLADE-WRIGHT - There are lots of concerns, so how are you going to comfort the community around this concern? It's more specifically about antimicrobial resistance.

Ms MURDOCH - Which I will be honest, I don't understand that and the human health aspect. Obviously, Dr Veitch has absolutely come out and said there was no human health risk within the fish -

Ms O'CONNOR - With very limited knowledge he came out and said that.

CHAIR - We will ask him further tomorrow about that, Clare.

Ms MURDOCH - So human health, I'm not going to step into Public Health's lane. What we have done is around environment, environmental risk, and environmental harm and that is the work we put out. That is what our work has been around, is environment.

With antimicrobial in the environment, it's different. It's about the impact on biome and in fauna, whereas the - and that's right, isn't it Dr Bannister - compared to human health and food safety where it's different science.

Ms GLADE-WRIGHT - You're changing an ecosystem though, aren't you?

Ms O'CONNOR - Yep.

Ms MURDOCH - I'm not, no, I don't actually - we're not. Just to be really, really clear, our results that we put out last week said the results of over 4500 tests -

Ms GLADE-WRIGHT - That's for florfenicol, not for antimicrobial resistance.

Ms MURDOCH - We're still talking here about the use of florfenicol, so I'm sorry, they are connected.

Ms GLADE-WRIGHT - The test you're referring to didn't really go far enough.

PUBLIC

Ms MURDOCH - No. Just to clarify, what this globally significant piece of work that has been peer reviewed and is nation and international leading has indicated that how florfenicol performs in the environment. It is also said that we have set for the first time in Australia a default guideline value for florfenicol which is 10 times lower than any of the monitoring results we got. Now, how you set that is on what's called species sensitivity curves, right?

Ms GLADE-WRIGHT - I remember this, I went to the briefing.

Ms MURDOCH - What that is about is when will harm, so you're talking about harm occur to any of those species. Now when you set your default guideline value you set it for the most sensitive species. Those that are up here that could take a lot more, they're protected if we set it here. We've set it at that lowest amount and none of the samples hit that amount. When we're talking, we can categorically say that over the summer there was an environmental harm, and then saying that we didn't do the antimicrobial, we did discuss it a bit in the report, but it is obviously something we need to investigate further, but that does not mean harm to the environment.

Ms O'CONNOR - But we don't know so you can't say that equivocally, with respect. We don't know that because the extent of the testing, it's quite limited at this point.

Ms GLADE-WRIGHT - Because this is my very basic understanding, if you are putting superbugs into the ecosystem how is it not changing the environment?

Ms MURDOCH - That is not my field and I'm not sure anyone's putting superbugs into this. I can't comment on that. I think it would be inappropriate for me to comment on that.

Ms GLADE-WRIGHT - Can you explain what antimicrobial resistance is, please?

Ms O'CONNOR - Perhaps we can get Darryl to do that.

Mr COOK - Antimicrobials is another word for antibiotic, so antibiotic resistance. It means the buildup of resistance to the antibiotic in microbes. That's the concern and while I accept there's unknowns in this area, I think what we would probably all agree with is that is something that can build up over time. As you use more antibiotics over time then certain genes -

CHAIR - You don't complete the course and all of that.

Mr COOK - Certain genes that are already there in a microbe in the environment can become increased, they call it 'upregulated', so there's more of those and they are detectable. Those genes are detectable in the environment and that's what the research will be specifically looking at. It's quite cutting-edge technologies that we can use to look for those things and then over time you might want to track whether there's an increase in that. When you talk about the environmental impact, we're talking about a fish farm where there's already a changed environmental condition so the microbes at the fish farm are already affected by the presence of a fish farm. That's the microbial community that you potentially impacting when you use an antibiotic at the farm.

PUBLIC

As I say we have all the samples already for that but if there's an impact there, you also then want to know how quickly it recovers because we want to keep a good healthy microbial community at the fish farm to keep processing the waste that comes. We will need to get more samples to look at that recovery. That's the environmental side of it. Is the community of microbes that live there being changed and how long does it take to recover, but we will also be looking for that genetic resistance or build-up of resistance in that community. The answers to that will go to our friends at the Public Health Centre.

Ms MURDOCH - Also I think Deb McSweyn is because she's an expert in this space who is the Chief Veterinary Officer who has had a really big discussion on this already today as well. I think you have to keep it in context around what's happened this summer, what are the results actually telling us about environmental harm and those things as well from what we can use guideline values and all that for. Really happy to have further conversations because, yes, the research is being done and will continue to be done.

Ms GLADE-WRIGHT - The results that you said will go to the Department of Health, will they also be published?

Ms MURDOCH - Everything we do will be published. We're working collectively on this because it is a collective topic that has to be done collectively, so biosecurity, ourselves, public health, it has to be a collective research effort.

Ms GLADE-WRIGHT - I've got one other question that's slightly off -

Ms O'CONNOR - Can I just check before you go there, thanks Clare, what's the EPA's understanding of the total tonnage of florfenicol that's been deposited to date?

Ms MURDOCH - Yes, so 3610.5 kg is our verified actual amount to date.

CHAIR - How many dosing's is that?

Ms MURDOCH - That's 14 treatments.

Ms O'CONNOR - So, 3605-

Ms MURDOCH - 3610.5.

Ms O'CONNOR - 3610.5 cubic-metres or tonnes?

Ms MURDOCH - Kilograms.

Ms O'CONNOR - Kilograms, so it's 3.5 tonnes and that's across all fish farm sites on all coasts?

Ms MURDOCH - That is for the 14 veterinary medical authorities from the 7 November 2025 until 19 January 2026.

Ms O'CONNOR - 7 November, but the deposition of florfenicol began before that, didn't it?

PUBLIC

Mr COOK - No, first treatment.

CHAIR - How many dosing's, or whatever you're calling it, occurred?

Ms MURDOCH - That's 14.

CHAIR - So 14 different times, so you're confident they've told you about every one they're doing?

Ms MURDOCH - Yes, what we're waiting to come in, which we will be releasing our final checks on, are the treatments at Great Taylors Bay and Roaring Beach (Redcliffs) site, and then Sheppards and Roberts, and these will all be released by June, so yes.

Ms GLADE-WRIGHT - The other question I had was around, again on the campaign trail, a lot of people in the Huon are really worried about the ageing septic systems and people's shacks and things just being plumbed straight into the Channel. Is that in your remit?

Ms MURDOCH - No, sorry, that's councils, but they need to -

CHAIR - TasWater.

Ms MURDOCH - No, it's councils -

Ms GLADE-WRIGHT - I've come from council, they said that's not our jurisdiction, the high water mark.

Ms MURDOCH - They still have regulatory responsibilities under EMCA, so yes.

Ms THOMAS - Oh sorry, did you say at a high watermark?

Ms GLADE-WRIGHT - Yes.

Ms THOMAS - Unless it's deemed Crown land, then what?

Ms MURDOCH - We regulate sewerage septic sets. We've got 77 that we regulate, level 2. Councils are all level 1 and generally septics. I've got a former environmental planner at the table for councils as well.

Ms GLADE-WRIGHT - You can't test the water cause council don't do -

Ms MURDOCH - They're responsible.

Ms GLADE-WRIGHT - They might be able to look at people's land bit, but what about the in water?

Ms MURDOCH - No, no, they're still responsible, the regulation of that septic, they are required, under EMCA, to regulate that.

CHAIR - Make sure it doesn't run off. That's their job.

PUBLIC

Ms MURDOCH - That is their job.

Ms O'CONNOR - Speaking of regulatory responsibilities, I'm sure you've read the Auditor-General's report -

Ms MURDOCH - Yes, last year.

Ms O'CONNOR - on the management of landfills in Tasmania, which he produced in September of last year. He makes the observations in his summary of findings that there's no comprehensive coordinated oversight of landfills across the length and breadth of the state, that the *Environmental Management Pollution Control Act of 1994* is overdue for review, no longer fit for purpose in addressing the complexity of contemporary environmental management, including landfill regulation. That the EPA's regulatory activity has been impeded by outdated, non-integrated data systems, that appropriate record keeping and risk-based site monitoring has been deprioritised as a result, and that the EPA does not have an effective approach to updating permit conditions.

I note that there has been a response, the EPA's response, I think to the Auditor-General's report. Can we just talk through, I mean many of them are agreed in principle, but what will change from the EPA's point of view to reassure Tasmanians that the many landfill sites across Tasmania, some of which the Auditor-General's office was unable to locate, are being appropriately monitored and managed?

Ms MURDOCH - I think we discussed this report last year as well and, yes, we do agree in principle. Again, this is one of the areas where the crossover with what is local government's role and ours, I think was confused in the report. But, we are looking to develop better systems, as we've said, and, hopefully, through NRE Tas and waste recovery and those things, better systems to data share to establish a single source of truth. So, the implementation timeframes that we had set, as I think are in our response, are 2026-27, and we're looking at having those data-sharing agreements with NRE Tas and - I'm sorry our systems upgrades that's not just the NELMS, it's the REGIT update but also the TASRAM was going to -

Ms ONG - Yes the NELMS and REGIT upgrade is relevant to this.

Ms MURDOCH - Yes, so I'm not sure if you've met our current - what we did get funding for in the Budget that did continue - our existing system for all our licences and regulatory effort are pretty well 30 years old?

Mr COOK - Not that.

Ms MURDOCH - 20? That system will give us a much better understanding of, you know, being able to get all our permits and see what's out there and all those that -

CHAIR - What didn't you get funded for that you wanted?

Ms MURDOCH - I think what you've seen in our budget is there'll be no FTE cuts at the EPA as a result of the Budget, which is a good position for us to be in.

Ms O'CONNOR - It's the bare minimum positive.

PUBLIC

Ms MURDOCH - We didn't put in for any other - we've obviously - because it's also about -

CHAIR - You're maintained, yeah?

Ms MURDOCH - We're maintained. This piece of work on getting our regulatory system into place is critical for us because we're kind of drowning in a system that, you know, you want to get a new licence out and, to be honest, it ends up taking three weeks because of these systems, and just being able to have visibility across and to have access to all of our licences, records.

CHAIR - So you won't be limited in what you can do? Unlike the Auditor-General, it will be limited under - well, he's not going to change his plan, he said, but his budget doesn't provide for it.

Ms O'CONNOR - Well -

CHAIR - No, I'm just saying.

Ms O'CONNOR - clearly, you will be limited in what you can do because the Auditor-General himself has found that the EPA hasn't been able to be effective in the management of landfills.

Ms MURDOCH - So, to be honest, I think it's fair to say there was a lot in that report that was not EPA responsibility - and they were local governments landfills.

Ms O'CONNOR - That's right.

Ms MURDOCH - What we've identified internally as well is better policies and documents around landfill management and working with councils around that as well. At the moment, this year, we're focusing on updating - because that's been a lot of years - is the quarry code of practice, we've got that underway to be upgraded. We've outlined the landfill sustainability guide as our next one to do that in as well, so program of work around this, and that's why that's 2026-27. I'd anticipate that in doing that work we'll engage with councils in, we'll have these discussions around roles, responsibilities, what are the data systems that need to be in place. We have had an internal process that has mapped what we could, which - TASRAM?

Ms ONG - Yes.

Ms MURDOCH - Yes, where landfills were, we'd be looking to get that up - we've just got to talk to landowners because, you know, landfill on their land - go through some privacy matters and get that up on the list as well. So, things that we can do in that space, we are doing.

Ms O'CONNOR - So, if we check back with the EPA when we have the pleasure of your company again -

Ms MURDOCH - Yes, next year.

Ms O'CONNOR - At the next Estimates.

PUBLIC

Ms MURDOCH - I would hope to say I've got the sustainability guide underway and that we've figured out the privacy matters around TASRAM and what we can put up on the list at least. Yes.

CHAIR - Anything else?

Ms O'CONNOR - No, not in the short seconds we have.

CHAIR - I'm just giving you the chance. Okay, well, is there anything you want to share with the committee before we wrap up? I don't think we've taken anything on notice was there?

Ms MURDOCH - Just those questions around the technology in regards to contaminants and what Cassy wanted as well, so that full question.

Ms O'CONNOR - Yeah, I think that had been written down, so

Ms MURDOCH - Thank you.

CHAIR - Thank you for your time today. Appreciate it.

Ms MURDOCH - Thank you.

The committee suspended from 6.29 p.m.

Environment

CHAIR - Thank you, minister. Welcome back. We're into the Environment portfolio and responsibilities under that. I'll invite you to introduce the members of the team at the table and I understand you didn't wish to make an opening comment, that's fine. We'll then launch into questions.

Mr ABETZ - Thank you, Chair. To my immediate right is Jason Jacobi, the secretary of the department. To his right is Louise Wilson, Deputy Secretary Environment, Heritage and Land. To my left is Vanessa Pinto, Deputy Secretary ReCFIT and Resources, and to her left is Dr Sarah Russell, Director of Climate Change.

Output Group 7 - Environment

7.1 Environmental Management

CHAIR - You are taking questions on 7.1. We have talked to the EPA about that, or not. I'm just clarifying.

Ms O'CONNOR - Not quite. I think not quite on 7.1.

CHAIR - Not quite?

PUBLIC

Ms O'CONNOR - I don't think we addressed, no.

CHAIR - Just to be clear where your responsibilities as minister sit, we have had the EPA, as you know, and the environmental management and environmental, sorry, regulation assessment, but we're going to environmental management now. Yes, 7.1.

Mr ABETZ - That's within the system.

CHAIR - Yes. So I'll go to Clare.

Ms GLADE-WRIGHT - Minister, I realise you've only been the minister for, is it four hours now?

Mr ABETZ - Yes, something like that.

CHAIR - We're getting close to five.

Ms GLADE-WRIGHT - Getting close to five. Well, I was just wondering, are you aware of the award-winning Derwent Estuary Program?

Mr ABETZ - Look I have been aware of the Derwent Estuary Program, which has gone for some time. I'm not sure of the exact history of it.

Ms LOVELL - It's nearly 30 years, isn't it?

Mr ABETZ - But, if I recall, in a former manifestation, I had representations from them as well and the stellar work they do.

Ms GLADE-WRIGHT - So, I just want to find out then, please, the annual contribution.

Mr JACOBI - We have a really good relationship with the Derwent Estuary Program. In fact, Louise and I were speaking with Ursula only a few weeks ago, and we regularly keep in contact with her. In 2025-26 the Tasmanian Government provided \$168,854 in funding to the Derwent Estuary Program along with approximately \$91,000 of in-kind testing support. Does that answer your question?

Ms GLADE-WRIGHT - Yes. So, there was a little bit of more, might be having its funding cut.

Mr JACOBI - The funding was always allocated. The forward funding is always allocated - core funding from previous budgets.

Ms GLADE-WRIGHT - Okay. So, moving forward, I mean I haven't been able to find it in the budget papers. Could you direct me maybe to where it comes under?

Ms WILSON - Because this funding is in the forward Estimates, it's recurrent. That's why you don't see it, because it's a previous allocation. It's not a new deliverable. It doesn't stand out anywhere. It's a bit like previously we talked about the National Trust funding. It's already in there. That's why you don't see it.

PUBLIC

Ms GLADE-WRIGHT - Okay. But you can assure me that moving forward it will continue to.

Mr JACOBI - At this stage the funding is ongoing.

Ms GLADE-WRIGHT - Okay.

Ms THOMAS - Can I just follow up on that please, so is it in 7.1, in that line item?

Ms WILSON - I do believe so.

CHAIR - Can we possibly get a breakdown of that line item to show us what's actually in it because it's, you know, it's one universal number.

Ms O'CONNOR - It's a universal shrinking number.

Mr ABETZ - I am assuming, does that need to be taken on notice? Do we have a chart or something that tells us how it's broken up?

Ms WILSON – Through you, minister. At a high level, environmental management is one of the outputs that stayed with the department when the EPA split. So, what is in there and what we'll talk about today is the sort of the EMPCA legislation that's allocated to this agency even though EPA deliver and regulate through EMPCA, and also waste and resource recovery. That stayed with us when the EPA split as well. It was the development of the act and administration of the act, and I believe the TIA and the Derwent Estuary Program was with EPA historically and that stayed with us too. So, that's what this output is. I hope that's helpful. It can be a little bit confusing.

Ms GLADE-WRIGHT - Okay. So, the Derwent Estuary Program provide the incredible Beach Watch, which has been really beneficial for the residents in Blackmans Bay, and I've just come out of a campaign period and I'm really aware that there are a lot of communities down the Channel who are really concerned about ageing septic systems and old sewerage being plumbed straight into the channel, and I was wondering if there's been any consideration to extending the scope of the Derwent Estuary Program to include the Channel.

Mr ABETZ - Well one thing I can report on is that on Friday morning I was down at Tinderbox, where - the name of the company escapes me - but they fully privately funded converting, I think, Class B water sewerage treatment of water that would have been discharged into, I think, Class A - I might have the categories wrong - but putting it in a pipe, under the estuary or channel, to Arm End, to South Arm for use for irrigation, and other purposes. So, that I must say, is an exciting private development, although it got a grant of - and I forget the amount of money, but that said, there is a lot of ageing infrastructure, and TasWater has the responsibility for that.

Some of us, including myself, did say to the economic regulator that their bid for increased fees was somewhat high, and their bid was not accepted in full, and as a result, they would say, that their work program to upgrade a whole lot of deficient sewage systems, and water systems, will take longer than they would have otherwise have liked, so that's, if you like, high-level commentary, I don't know if you, secretary -

PUBLIC

Ms GLADE-WRIGHT - Maybe in the interim we could offer the residents a Beach Watch program in the channel, just so they're aware of, you know, when the water quality becomes really bad, that they can be warned.

Mr JACOBI - Through you, minister, we don't actually determine the Beach Watch program, that's a -

Ms GLADE-WRIGHT - No, the DEP.

Mr JACOBI - DEP does that, we're just a partner along with all the multiple other partners, including councils, but would certainly be a matter for DEP to consider.

Ms GLADE-WRIGHT - But if we wanted to extend the DEP into the channel, then wouldn't that be a decision for you?

Mr JACOBI - It would be EPA monitoring as well, maybe.

Ms WILSON - Just around responsibilities, through you minister, the Derwent Estuary Program actually has a number of partners, not just state government, industry and local government. So, any extension to the work that the DEP does in this geographical scope, I think would be a matter for the DEP board and with its partners - and all the partners would need to make contributions. So, I think that it's a very much a partnership model, exactly - not exactly, very similar to the Tamar Estuary and Esk Rivers program as well, in the north.

Ms GLADE-WRIGHT - So minister, any appetite for that?

Mr ABETZ - Look, always appetite. I've got to be careful because it's in my cabbage patch as a resident of Blackmans Bay. So I declare that, but -

Ms GLADE-WRIGHT - It's a great program, isn't it? The residents get warned when there's been a spike in nutrient.

Mr ABETZ - Yes, and that happens, from time to time, for whatever reasons, and often there's speculation as to what the actual reason is. Some even claim it's a whole host of seagulls, especially, what is it, at the southern end of Blackmans Bay Beach, and whether it is or isn't, I don't know. The important thing is that people be notified when it's not a good time to swim at a particular beach.

Ms GLADE-WRIGHT - So minister, who's the government's representative that attends the DEP meetings?

Mr ABETZ - Look, yes, we will take that on notice.

Ms WILSON - Through you, minister, I just wasn't sure, but because a lot of the focus on the TIA and the DEP program is on water quality, our colleagues in the primary industry and water division are our representatives on the partnership group. It doesn't - even though the funding sits in this output in my division, but we all - we have input, and also the Analytical Services Tasmania does the in-kind testing, the water quality testing. So, that's how it cuts across different areas of the agency.

PUBLIC

Ms GLADE-WRIGHT - So, I don't know what my question is, but I want to find out how we can get this into the board meeting of the DEP so they can consider expanding their scope.

Mr JACOBI - Through you, minister, I would be happy for us to raise it on your behalf at the next the next meeting with DEP.

Ms GLADE-WRIGHT - That would be great: thank you. My next question was around the NRM bodies, is this the right place to ask about that?

CHAIR - I believe it is.

Ms GLADE-WRIGHT - Yes?

Mr JACOBI - NRM - primary industries and water.

CHAIR - It's primary industries. Wrong minister.

Ms GLADE-WRIGHT - NRM, like NRM South and NRM North?

Ms WILSON - Natural Values Management.

Ms GLADE-WRIGHT - Not this bit?

Mr ABETZ - Yes, that's in primary - no.

CHAIR - Primary industries, yes.

Ms GLADE-WRIGHT - Okay. All right.

Mr ABETZ - One could assume they would be, but machinery of government is a wonderful thing.

Ms GLADE-WRIGHT - Yes, I am learning.

CHAIR - Is that fixing it: is the machinery-of-government changes fixing that?

Mr ABETZ - I don't think that one.

Mr JACOBI - With your indulgence, minister -

Mr ABETZ - Yes, yes.

Mr JACOBI - I've listened to the question. I will do my best to see if I can answer it, having just come from Primary Industries and Water.

Mr ABETZ - Excellent, good, good, excellent.

PUBLIC

Ms GLADE-WRIGHT - That would be great, thank you. Well, I understand they're facing a slight reduction in their funding, so I just wanted to know about that.

Mr JACOBI - No, it's not the case.

Ms GLADE-WRIGHT - That's not the case?

Mr JACOBI - No. So, through you, minister, all the NRMs have been allocated their core funding. There has been a reduction since previous years, but they have all been allocated their core funding through this Budget.

Ms WILSON - So, through you? Is that okay?

Mr JACOBI - Are you going to answer it now?

Ms WILSON - Yeah, there's additional - so, they've got their recurrent core funding and they each receive - I'm just going to check on the number because I don't have the right folder here because it's in the other one.

Mr JACOBI - So, they've each received \$435,000, I believe, across - each NRM has received \$435,000 this financial year.

Ms GLADE-WRIGHT - Okay. And that would be where in the Budget?

Ms WILSON - That's a deliverable in the budget papers and under the PIW Natural Values Management output.

CHAIR - I did see that. I was just looking at it.

Ms WILSON - I've got the numbers here now, because it was in a different folder.

CHAIR - Output group 7 Environment, under Primary Industries and Water.

Ms WILSON - So, through you, minister, the Tasmanian government has made a commitment to NRMs and is providing an additional 579,000 each year over the next four years, I think, over the forward Estimates. This is on top of core funding of 750,000 per annum, so that's across the three bodies. This means each of the three regional NRMs will receive a total of \$443,000 in 2026-27 and this funding is in the forward Estimates until 2029-30.

Ms GLADE-WRIGHT - Great. Another amazing group of organisations doing amazing work.

Ms WILSON - Yes, we work closely with them.

Mr JACOBI - If I could, I was just going to add that through some of our Threatened Species Fund, the NRMs have been allocated funding for particular projects.

Ms WILSON - Yes.

Ms GLADE-WRIGHT - On top of that?

PUBLIC

Mr JACOBI - On top of that.

CHAIR - Well, you can talk about threatened species if you like.

Ms GLADE-WRIGHT - Fantastic. Thank you.

Ms O'CONNOR - Thank you, Chair. First of all, minister, congratulations on your elevation to the most important portfolio in government.

CHAIR - For however long it lasts.

Ms O'CONNOR - I'm sure you will relish however many days you have in this portfolio.

Ms THOMAS - I reckon you will love it so much, you will want to continue.

Mr ABETZ - It's not up to me, member for Elwick.

Ms O'CONNOR - At one level, I hope so, given your tenacity and what I sense is an evolution of your outlook over your journey in politics. I hope you don't take that as a slur.

Mr ABETZ - What's the definition of patronising?

Ms O'CONNOR - No, it's matronising, if it comes from a woman. I will just go back to an answer that you gave earlier to the member for Huon about moving sewage outfall onto lands, and sometimes agricultural lands. I'm not sure if you're aware, minister, but there is an issue with that, because untreated sewage contains polychlorinated biphenyls, which are PCBs, and they're a forever chemical, and in some parts of the United States where there's been long-term application of effluent onto agricultural lands, those agricultural lands become contaminated and unusable, because PCBs are called 'forever chemicals'. I wonder if the environment division of NRE is having a look at PCBs within effluent and how you might make that effluent safer for application onto productive lands.

Mr ABETZ - Look, there were environmental people from the department there when I was there on Friday, and I know they have very sophisticated systems to make the water acceptable, but as for the detail of that, and whether this particular plant deals with those matters, I don't know, but we could take that on notice.

Mr JACOBI - Through you, minister, it's managed by the EPA. We have not, that I'm aware of, turned our minds specifically to that issue.

Ms O'CONNOR - Okay. So, the EPA has a regulatory role under EMPCA, but the Environment department must take an interest, of course, in what materials are being released into the environment and whether or not there's a public health consequence for that?

Mr JACOBI - Through you, minister, are you talking specifically about sewage effluent and septic effluent?

Ms O'CONNOR - Yes, I'm talking specifically about PCBs, which are confirmed to be found in human effluent because they're used in a whole range of shampoos and other cosmetic

PUBLIC

products. They end up in effluent. In the United States there's a huge problem because counties that have been applying effluent to land for decades now are finding that land becomes unusable to agriculture because PCBs persist in the environment. Is that something that NRE is aware of or concerned about?

Mr JACOBI - Through you, minister, I certainly agree we're concerned about it, but it's not a matter that we have dealt with in the past I'm aware of. And regulated by the EPA.

Ms O'CONNOR - Is that something that is only the EPA's responsibility?

Mr JACOBI - As far as I'm aware, yes.

Ms O'CONNOR - The dispersal or policy around dispersal of effluent into the environment is only administered by the EPA?

Mr JACOBI - I'd have to take that on notice.

Ms O'CONNOR - Are you happy to take that on notice?

Mr JACOBI - Yes.

Ms O'CONNOR - Okay. Have you read the reports or the research about the residual effects of PCB in the environment.

Mr JACOBI - I haven't personally read them, no.

Ms O'CONNOR - Okay, that's a bit of a worry for the secretary of NRE, but anyway, moving on.

Mr ABETZ - Oh, come on. There are a lot of research papers in a whole range of areas. I think that's a bit unfair. But what I think we could do potentially, is take the question on notice if the secretary is willing to flick-pass it to the EPA for their comment.

Ms O'CONNOR - Okay. Thank you. I will come back to you on that at another time. Is there any update on the government's response to the State of the Environment Report, noting that the government missed two statutory deadlines for the production of the State of the Environment Report and that the response to the recommendations of the State of the Environment Report to date have been non-committal and, to some extent, a bit apathetic.

Mr ABETZ - I will try and I'm sure others may be able to assist, but I do have a brief in front of me that tells me that the government committed to providing a response by the end of 2024. It's asserted that was done and that the response to the report identified four key priorities based on report recommendations:

- Develop a long-term vision and strategy for Tasmania's environment;
- Develop an environmental data strategy;
- Focus on securing covenants and other effective conservation measures through the Private Land Conservation Program to deliver greater protection for underrepresented ecosystems; and

PUBLIC

- Improve native vegetation mapping and information.

This is in a manner that is carefully planned, mindful of the current fiscal constraints. We are progressing, scoping, and planning this priority work to ensure that resources are used efficiently, opportunities for partnering are identified, and outcomes are delivered effectively.

Ms O'CONNOR - Thank you, minister. The long-delayed State of the Environment Report noted a decline in ecosystem health across a range of indicators and made a number of recommendations to government about how policy might be changed or improved in order to better protect the environment. Have any areas of government policy changed or will be changed in response to the recommendations of the State of the Environment Report, and if so, what are they?

Ms WILSON - Through you, minister, a lot of the recommendations in the State of the Environment Report cut across a range of portfolios in different areas even just within NRE Tas, as well as other agencies, and we can provide this as a follow up, you may have seen it last Estimates and we've updated it. There is a long list of activities and things, programs and services that are being provided that contribute to the state of Tasmania's environment. The government's response to the State of Environment Report focused on four of the recommendations which is where the new and focused activity is that NRE Tas is progressing. Those four areas, and I can talk to some of the thinking around those and some of the actions that are happening, but I think the question you are asking around changes in policy across all of those policy areas and portfolios is probably a little big and broad to answer at this table.

Ms O'CONNOR - Okay, thank you, Louise. If we just narrow into the recommendations that were specific to NRE, has there been any move to update government policy or legislation in response to State of the Environment Report recommendation?

Ms WILSON - Through you minister, probably one of my really big priorities in my division is around the Private Land Conservation Program. What that was part of, I've forgotten the recommendation, I'm sorry, but it was a part of a recommendation, and it is what we're focusing on. We're building and strengthening the capacity of the team. Now, I will qualify this with we have received Commonwealth funding for this program, it's historically received funding and we've received a recent funding boost to that.

We are building the capacity of the team. We are committing to deliver the significant number of additional hectares we are required to develop covenant under that funding agreement. Importantly, what we want to do is, and what we are doing is contemporising the program. That will involve reviewing and adjusting policy settings and we want to look at the legislative settings, because that part of the *Nature Conservation Act* is really dated and so there's lots of improvement there.

We're also looking at improving our processes so we can actually deliver more convenience more quickly because there's a strong demand for these, not just for purely for conservation purposes on private land, but also for offset purposes.

Ms O'CONNOR - Thank you, Ms Wilson, and this is no slight on you, but private land conservation was a very small element of the State of the Environment Report. There were multiple recommendations, and as you know, they were across agencies but many of them

PUBLIC

related to areas of NRE's particular responsibility. Minister, can you indicate how many State of the Environment Report recommendations government has accepted and will implement?

Mr ABETZ - That I can't, and I will need to take that on notice unless somebody can -

Ms WILSON - We can provide that. There was an initial response, minister, you just don't have it.

Mr ABETZ - We will just take that on notice.

CHAIR - Just to clarify the question then, Cassy, just quickly, the question?

Ms O'CONNOR - The question is: how many State of the Environment Report recommendations has the government accepted and will implement?

Mr ABETZ - Alright, we will take it on notice.

Ms O'CONNOR - The State of the Environment Report was tabled in state parliament in September of 2024 by the former minister for Environment, who misled this committee in November last year, but perhaps the recommendation with the greatest potential impact was recommendation 4 that proposed the government undertake a review of all existing legislated sustainable development objectives within the resource management and planning system and review quote:

All legislation that is informed by the existing RMPS objectives to ensure that legislation establishes contemporary and effective decision-making.

The recommendation also stated that if such a review is undertaken, its recommended priority is given to the *Land Use Planning and Approvals Act of 1993*, *State Policies and Projects Act of 1993* and *Environmental Management and Pollution Control Act 1994*. The state government's response to that recommendation by the former minister who misled this committee was that the recommendation was supported and that quote:

The Tasmanian government is undertaking a preliminary scoping and feasibility assessment of priority environmental legislative reform.

How's that scoping exercise going?

Mr ABETZ - As I understand it, there has been some information placed on the web on the department website, but we will take that on notice.

Ms O'CONNOR - Oh, there's something on the website that responds to a major recommendation for legislative review in order to better protect the environment?

Mr ABETZ - No, the government's response, which I think covers that.

CHAIR - In response to -

Ms O'CONNOR - Yes, but I'm looking for an update. How is the scoping and feasibility assessment of priority environmental legislative reforms going?

PUBLIC

Ms WILSON - Through you, minister. There has been some thinking around what a review of the *Environmental Management and Pollution Control Act* (EMPCA) and - now, you're just testing me on that exact recommendation because we've been focusing on the four priority areas that the government announced. I don't believe there was an intention to review the whole RMPS; there's multiple pieces of legislation. But we were looking at - or potentially whether - what we could do with EMPCA and some other pieces of legislation that needed to be looked at.

Now, with the national reforms to the *EPBC Act*, the EMPCA review will be - it's pre-emptive to unpack EMPCA right now, but we are looking at some measures to improve assessments and approvals. But not review that, because when the EPBC reforms, particularly all the national standards are in place and we need to negotiate a new bilateral for assessment and approvals under that act, then we will almost certainly need to actually review EMPCA and make quite a few changes.

I think a full legislative review - I might just have to go back to that recommendation - but we are looking at, as I said, *Nature Conservation Act*, some parts of that act and updating those as well as EMCA down the track, but not straight away - not at the moment.

Ms O'CONNOR - Thank you, Ms Wilson. I really feel for you at the table tonight, because you have a minister who's only been installed for a few hours, but also, you're dealing with a government that hasn't committed to any substantive recommendations in the State of the Environment Report. The government selected a few focus areas that required minimal shift and has made no commitment to a key recommendation of the State of the Environment Report, which was to make sure that the legislation that guides environmental management in this state is contemporary and fit for purpose. This question is not to you, Ms Wilson. I don't want to put you in this position again. This question is to the Treasurer and part-time Minister for the Environment.

CHAIR - No, he is the Minister for Environment. Let's be respectful.

Ms O'CONNOR - Sorry, not part-time. You will definitely be the Minister for the Environment until Friday.

Mr ABETZ - That is determined by somebody other than myself.

Ms O'CONNOR - I'm just talking about the facts. You will definitely be the minister -

CHAIR - Let's just focus on the question without the slurs.

Ms O'CONNOR - No, I don't believe that was a slur. I believe that was a statement of fact and I didn't intend to -

CHAIR - He is the Minister for Environment. He was sworn in today.

Ms O'CONNOR - He is the Minister for the Environment. Can the Minister for the Environment detail to the committee what the government's response is to a key recommendation of the State of the Environment Report, which is that these three statutes, which have such an effect on environmental management in Tasmania, be reviewed so that they're effective.

PUBLIC

Mr ABETZ - I will - the government has concentrated on those four items that I read out earlier and anything else I'm happy to take on notice.

Ms O'CONNOR - Okay, perhaps I could ask whether or not the response to the State of the Environment Report has been discussed at a high ministerial level? I'm not asking you to detail Cabinet discussions, but it's a very significant piece of work and a high-quality piece of work that's been undertaken and it deserves a comprehensive response. Has there been any high-level discussion about the recommendations in the State of the Environment Report and how they might be responded to rather than cherry-picking easy bits for low-hanging fruit.

Mr ABETZ - There's a whole lot of descriptors in there that I won't engage on.

Ms O'CONNOR - I didn't think there was that many actually that time.

CHAIR - Let's restate the question so the minister can focus on the question. So, the question is?

Ms O'CONNOR - Well, the question was pretty clear. I'm not sure I should have to waste the committee's time to restate it.

CHAIR - I think it would be helpful if you did. What is the question you're asking?

Ms O'CONNOR - I will just restate a really straight-forward question I just asked: was the State of the Environment Report discussed at a high ministerial level and was a decision made at that high ministerial level to effectively ignore most of the recommendations in the State of the Environment Report and cherry pick for low-hanging fruit areas that include, for example, covenants.

CHAIR - How about you start with one question at a time?

Ms O'CONNOR - No, thanks Chair. I think it was a pretty straightforward question. I've been made to repeat a question I thought was pretty clear. Has the State of the Environment Report been discussed at a high level by government and has any decision been made to accept the report for the high-quality of work that it is and implement its recommendations?

Mr ABETZ - The government has responded and that was an all-of-government response and the four priority areas I've already outlined, which indicate that the government did exercise its collective mind in relation to the State of the Environment Report and determined four priority areas. Often in life you cannot deal with everything immediately. You have to choose some priorities - the government has chosen four priority areas. You can describe that as 'cherry picking.'

Ms O'CONNOR - Well, it is.

Mr ABETZ - Or use other language. The government in response to your question would be saying, yes, it was considered. That's how the government response came to be. Part of the government response is the concentration on those four priority areas outlined previously.

PUBLIC

Ms O'CONNOR - The corollary of that is that government decided to not accept the majority of the recommendations in the State of the Environment Report, including the review of the *Land Use Planning and Approvals Act*, the *State Policies and Projects Act* and EMCA.

Mr ABETZ - Just because you prioritise something, that does not, as of necessity, mean that you reject other things. Often you cannot do everything you would necessarily want to do. A dint of time, dint of resource, whatever, and the government has made its priorities clear.

Ms O'CONNOR - Okay, my final question, and I will pass over to my colleague, Ms Thomas, shortly, should the Chair wish for that to be the case. Your predecessor in the role, who's lost a job for misleading this committee, committed to the Tasmanian government undertaking a preliminary scoping and feasibility assessment of priority environmental legislative reforms. Where is that process?

Mr ABETZ - I will have to take that on notice.

Ms O'CONNOR - Is it possible for one of your officers to answer that? Well, the previous minister said the Tasmanian government is undertaking a preliminary scoping and feasibility assessment of priority environmental legislative reforms. What's happening with that scoping exercise? I mean, the question is, has the government walked away from the commitment made by the previous Environment minister to undertake a preliminary scoping and feasibility assessment of priority environmental legislative reforms.

Ms WILSON - Through you, minister, I'm not 100 per cent sure what the former minister was referring to there, but I would -

Ms O'CONNOR - This was in December 2024, a public statement.

Ms WILSON - Yes, so around that time, I'll go back to my previous statement or words around we have been looking very closely at a full review of EMCA, but there have also been some amendments when the EPA split, and some improvements. And I guess we were looking at the feasibility of doing a full review or doing some minor amendments, some further short-term ones and then I guess the feasibility side of that is that very quickly we knew that the federal government was progressing EMCA reforms. We didn't realise they're going to be this quick, but we knew they were coming and that we would need legislative change, so that was a priority that the former minister had was on EMCA. There were lots of comments around, for example, issues, industry had issues with EMCA. So instead of progressing those that full review and legislative reform to EMCA, what we have been doing is working with industry to unpack what they're saying the issues are with assessment and approvals and the difficulties of EMCA and working through what the solutions might be that are non-statutory.

Ms O'CONNOR - Okay, so could I just have a final follow-up question on that and Ms Wilson I'd prefer it for you if you didn't have to answer this. What I heard from that answer is that the government will be guided by industry and industry only, in terms of its response to the recommendation of the State of the Environment Report. That we have a comprehensive review of those key statutes that guide land management decisions, how wastes and other issues are dealt with. The former minister didn't just say that because she felt like it, the former minister stated that in December 2024 on behalf of the government and told Tasmanians that there'd be a scoping exercise and a review undertaken, the preliminary scoping and feasibility assessment of priority environmental legislative reforms. But, what I've just heard from

PUBLIC

Ms Wilson's answer is that industry will direct government on how it responds to that recommendation. Is that correct, minister?

Mr ABETZ - Look, at the end of the day, the government determines its policy positions.

Ms O'CONNOR - But, at the end of the day, the government should also be open to listening to experts, to listening to the Tasmanian Planning Commission, which undertook the work on the State of the Environment Report and that work was comprehensive because it was widely consulted. Government shouldn't just be making decisions about the environment in a vacuum, should it? It should be guided by expert advice and what I'm hearing here today, sadly, is that the government is not committed to making sure our land-use and environmental management legislation is contemporary and fit for purpose.

Mr ABETZ - Well you've just made a statement telling us what you believe you have heard and people can read the *Hansard* and make up their own determinations.

Ms O'CONNOR - Well disabuse me of the notion.

Mr ABETZ - Look, the government is open and listens to -

Ms O'CONNOR - Industry.

Mr ABETZ - Yes, to industry.

Ms O'CONNOR - And only industry apparently on this.

Mr ABETZ - No, no, no. We listen to everybody and we then make a determination based on what we believe is within the best interests of Tasmania.

Ms O'CONNOR - Well, I'm not sure you understand what the best interests of Tasmania are, if you're not prepared -

Mr ABETZ - Well it would be fair to say that you and I have a fundamental disagreement.

Ms O'CONNOR - if you're not prepared, if you're not prepared to listen to the State of the Environment Report.

Mr ABETZ - We have a fundamental disagreement -

Ms O'CONNOR - Isn't that sad?

Mr ABETZ - in relation to what the best interests of Tasmania is and I'm sure that from time to time you might reflect that we aren't all wrong when it comes to the government in pursuing our objectives and seeking to enhance the wellbeing of our fellow Tasmanians.

Ms O'CONNOR - Do you believe it is in the best interests of Tasmanians and this island that LUPA, EMPCA, the *State Policies and Projects Act*, none of which have been comprehensively reviewed and updated since their inception, are made fit for purpose?

PUBLIC

Mr ABETZ - Well, look, you are making an assertion that they're not fit for purpose.

Ms O'CONNOR - Well, no, that's what the State of the Environment Report said.

Mr ABETZ - The question, whether they can be updated, is another matter. I dare say you would prefer the existing legislation, irrespective of how deficient you might consider it to be, that you would prefer that legislation to be in existence rather than not having any of that legislation on the statute.

Ms O'CONNOR - That's just a ridiculous point. What I would prefer -

Mr ABETZ - No, no, no -

Ms O'CONNOR - and I think what most Tasmanians would prefer, is that you had a government that accepted recommendations from experts in the Planning Commission on the state of the environment. I think that's what most Tasmanians would prefer.

Mr ABETZ - See, logical thinking requires you to also consider the counterfactual as to what you are asserting and when I put to you what the counterfactual was, what you were asserting -

Ms O'CONNOR - What is it? Counterfactual is that we don't have any environmental legislation or regulation.

Mr ABETZ - That's right and therefore -

Ms O'CONNOR - That's a scenario that's ridiculous.

Mr ABETZ - Right.

Ms O'CONNOR - Yeah, I'm glad you agree.

Mr ABETZ - And, therefore, you support the legislation as is rather than -

Ms O'CONNOR - No.

Mr ABETZ - If I can finish a sentence.

Ms O'CONNOR - We support it being contemporary.

CHAIR - Let the minister finish.

Ms O'CONNOR - Sure.

Mr ABETZ - That you would prefer the legislation as is, compared to no legislation, so our only -

Ms O'CONNOR - Ridiculous policy.

PUBLIC

Mr ABETZ - so our only topic of discussion is, can we make it even better, and when we have those sort of discussions, that is, where you can have, if I might say, a lower temperature discussion and consideration being given to matters as you have outlined. But look, as a government, always open to suggestions and considerations and priorities have to be determined from time to time and the government has made its full priority areas from that report well and truly known.

CHAIR - Minister, are you averse to reviewing legislation on a regular basis wherever it sits?

Mr ABETZ - No, no, no, not at all.

CHAIR - So, you say by extension then, legislation like EMPCA and other related environment legislation that hasn't had a comprehensive review over recent years should be reviewed, regularly?

Mr ABETZ - Look, we have, if I recall correctly, implemented a policy that regulations are reviewed every 10 years.

CHAIR - That wasn't a policy, that was a required part many years ago, well before my time.

Mr ABETZ - Right.

CHAIR - Yeah.

Mr ABETZ - Every 10 years.

CHAIR - Every 10 years they're automatically repealed to tidy up the mess.

Mr ABETZ - Yep, and it seems to me that that is a good practice in relation to regulation, and in relation to legislation a similar practice of considering legislation does sound like a good thing to do. But, we have many, many statutes on the book and to try to review all of them would be a mammoth, mammoth task.

CHAIR - But surely, there should be a program of legislative review?

Mr ABETZ - Look, as a hypothetical I couldn't argue with that proposition, but allocating the resources and then determining which ones ought be up for review - I know our Criminal Code, for example, gets a fairly regular review and update, which is important, so there are those matters of government that are determined from time to time.

Ms THOMAS - Minister, do you know what proportion of the state Budget is spent on environmental management?

Mr ABETZ - Look, no I don't and it would be spread over a number of different portfolios. So, gathering that together - I don't know if anybody can assist me on that.

Ms THOMAS - That's okay, I just wondered if you knew and if that might be a worthwhile measure for the government to look at in the bigger picture of things in terms of

PUBLIC

how we're actually looking at the priorities. As you say, it's all about priorities such as looking at what proportion of the state Budget goes towards this important area.

Mr ABETZ - Yeah, it's a question then - and that's where it becomes difficult - what do you categorise as environmental, environmental improvements? So, just for example, a water-treatment plant at Tinderbox that I spoke about earlier, is that a business initiative? It's a great economic enabler, but it's also a very good environmental outcome. So do you allocate the full amount to business economic enabling, or do you allocate it to the environment, or do you split it in half, or do you allocate, I think it was about a \$9 million grant they received for that quite substantial plant, \$9 million for business development and opportunities in South Arm, and \$9 million, and double count it? I'm not sure how you would necessarily go about all that, but that said if we had the resource, it would be a good exercise to undertake because there are lots of things that we do seeking to clean up our environment, be better stewards of the environment, which also have other benefits.

Ms THOMAS - Absolutely. Well, I'm glad you agree it might be a useful measure. I'm sure there's plenty of people, and all the people you have here supporting you would have ideas better than me, for sure, on what sort of things would quantify that sort of measure. But, just interested if there was any sort of measure, but clearly not at this point.

But what we can see from the Budget papers in line 7.1, is that the Budget drops from \$6.7 million in 2025-26 to \$4.88 million in 2026-27, and then down to \$1.13 million, which would be a very, very, very small 0.000 something per centage of the state Budget, I would imagine in 2029-30. It's a significant drop. What is the government going to stop doing to save \$3 million in environmental management, and what impact will this have on environmental management, and the environment?

Ms O'CONNOR - Good question.

Ms WILSON - Thank you, through you, minister. I'm just going to read this out, so I get the numbers right, and the timeframes, but also, I just want to go back to the scope of this particular output. It includes waste and resource recovery, it includes a small number of resources that stayed in this agency when the EPA split that's responsible for sort of the policy, pure policy function and that's it. But also there is some government investment prior to the waste resource recovery, and it also includes waste and resource recovery. Having said that-

Ms THOMAS - Which sits with NRE.

Ms WILSON - Yes, that's in my division, and the CEO of the waste and resource recovery board is here today, and we can bring her up to talk about details.

Ms THOMAS - Oh, okay.

Ms WILSON - I will read this out, you're not interested in the decrease between the original budget and the estimated outcome, I'm assuming?

Ms THOMAS - Yes, no that's the second question I have, so if you want to explain that now, that would be great.

Ms WILSON - Okay, I will read verbatim, it's probably the safest thing for me to do.

PUBLIC

Ms THOMAS - The estimated outcomes \$3 million less than the budget appropriation.

Ms WILSON - We're looking at the revenue by appropriation.

So, the decrease of \$3.02 million between the 2025-26 original budget and 2025-26 estimated outcome is due to budget cash flow changes for the circular economy waste initiative.

I can explain what that is, if you would like?

Ms THOMAS - Yes, thank you.

Ms WILSON - So the Circular Economy Waste Initiative is government funding that was set aside largely prior to the *Waste and Resource Recovery Act* coming into place in 2022, and that act established the Landfill Levy. That Landfill Levy is fully hypothecated, and reinvestment into waste and resource recovery initiatives. The intention was for, once that levy is up and running, that would fund that work, but under the government and the minister at the time, set up funding to get that work started, and to fund a number of initiatives in the absence of the Landfill Levy revenue coming in. So, that's what that is.

Ms THOMAS - Right.

Ms WILSON - That was a budget cash flow change. What was predicted and budgeted to be spent and then what ended up being the estimated outcome. The budget movements between the financial years, the decrease in 2026-27 of \$1.82 million from the original budget largely reflects the funding profile of the circular economy waste initiative - and I will come back to this; I will just read it all out. The decrease in 2027-28 of \$3.68 million reflects the completion of the circular economy waste initiative. The 2026-27 Budget initiative, the marine environment Tasmania act, that's new money that is coming in and then it drops off, and the impact of operational efficiencies. The decrease in 2028-29 of \$93,000 largely reflects the impact of operational efficiencies, and 2029-30 is due to indexation. Once the circular economy waste initiatives are completed, then it's business as usual. Waste and resource recovery is then funded from the Landfill Levy revenue. Then this, in terms of what the government appropriation pays for in this space, is for then, the EMPCA (*Environmental Management and Pollution Control Act 1994*), a little bit of policy and EMPCA resource.

The circular economy waste initiative changes over time because the quite large grants for large infrastructure sorts of initiatives. As with any grants, but particularly large ones, cash flow changes over time because of milestone payments, sometimes delays. That's why that drops off. It is not a budget savings, as such, except for the percentages that we're allocating across the board. It is largely the circular economy waste initiative finishing and completing, as it should do, because the government shouldn't continue to fund those when the Landfill Levy is set up to fund it.

CHAIR - How much is the levy raising? Do we know?

Ms WILSON - Beg your pardon?

CHAIR - How much is the levy raising at the moment?

Ms WILSON - Gosh, I would have funding - sorry, information in somewhere. But just probably haven't got it handy because there's multiple bits to all of this budget output group.

PUBLIC

CHAIR - There's not an actual headline figure of how much the levy's raised in the last-

Ms WILSON - Would you mind if I just asked the CEO and general manager to find that? Be quicker for someone back there to.

CHAIR - That's alright. We will move on and they can come back to it.

Ms WILSON - And potentially we could take it on notice, too, if we can't find it.

CHAIR - We will if you can't get it. That's fine.

Mr ABETZ - Let's take it on notice so it's on the record, and if we're able to provide the information during the evening we will.

Ms THOMAS - Thank you for that explanation, Ms Wilson. Was the budget in prior years, to your recollection, I know you might not have figures in front of you, but was it around that same level that it will be in 2027-28 prior to the circular economy waste initiative coming into play?

Ms WILSON - Through you, minister. My understanding is, and I would unqualify this answer because I don't have the figures, but based on principles that funding, once that drops off, it should be for the resources that stayed with us from the EPA. To my knowledge, there wasn't sort of any other operational funding. That should just be business as usual and the funding that creates the larger numbers in the next few years, that was initiative funding always meant to be and, of course, there will be factored in there some operational efficiencies because every area notionally will be contributing to that to a degree. As we said earlier, that might get tweaked as we do our plan.

Ms THOMAS - Thank you for that explanation. I appreciate it. I can go on to another topic if you like.

Ms WILSON - Oh, sorry, I do -

Ms THOMAS - You have an answer?

Ms WILSON - Through the minister, I do have revenue numbers in front of me. It is in a document - I will just make sure that it has been checked - if the document has been checked by finance, otherwise I will take it on notice. I will just go back to table - so, waste levy revenue in 2025-26 original budget was \$20.456 million. The estimated outcome is the same in 2025-26; in 2026-27, it increases to 30.793 million; in 2027-28, 31.42 million; in 2028-29, 32.207 million; and 2029-30 it goes down to 20.456 million.

CHAIR - Why is that? Why did it go down? I would have thought it would be pretty consistent.

Ms MACKEY - Through you, minister -

CHAIR - I have to introduce - you have to sit at the table, and if you could just introduce - or maybe she could introduce herself, if you're not that familiar, minister.

PUBLIC

Ms MACKEY - Holly Mackey, the CEO of the Waste and Resource Recovery Board. The decrease in the outer years - and it's very hard to predict - levy revenue is predicted on tonnes to landfills, so ideally if we're doing our job correctly, we should see a decrease in tonnes to landfill and therefore a decrease in levy revenue, although we don't have a crystal ball.

CHAIR - Oh, don't you? The Treasurer doesn't either.

Ms THOMAS - I'm glad you said that, because that was going to be my question: why does it keep going up? It's not a good sign, so thank you for that explanation.

CHAIR - Is there any other questions on environmental management?

Ms O'CONNOR - Just a quick one: The Auditor-General's report 1 of 2025-26 *Management of landfills in Tasmania*, notes that the *Environmental Management and Pollution Control Act 1994* is overdue for review, that it's no longer fit for purpose in addressing the complexity of contemporary environmental management, including landfill regulation. Given the Auditor-General's evidence-based concern about EMPCA, which, as I understand it, hasn't been reviewed properly for almost 30 years, has the government addressed its mind to the Auditor-General's report and the recommendation that EMPCA be overhauled and updated to ensure it's fit for purpose?

CHAIR - You want your secretary back.

Ms MACKEY - Through you, minister, well, it's essentially the same answer to the question that you've discussed before around EMPCA review and undertaking a review.

Ms WILSON - Through you, minister, reviewing EMPCA is a big job, and you want to do it once, and we are hearing that there are issues with EMPCA - some of them, the issues with EMPCA are not necessarily - people are saying are with EMPCA are not necessarily the legislation themselves, it's somehow - the assessment and approvals are done, but I think there is room for improvement with EMPCA, but if we're going to review it, we don't want to fiddle with it and we're going to review it, is really big job and we really - I guess we would wait until those EPBC reforms are understood. We are still - they're still rolling out the details of those, and just the work in monitoring those and trying to influence also where the Commonwealth is going with them, and then understanding where they're going to land, that's going to take some time, and it's a big job. So, we wanted to see how that - the national reforms play out, and then I think we'd look at okay, how does - what do we need to do with EMPCA now, and that would inform what the - I guess what government's position would be in relation to a full review or amendments to key elements of it.

Ms O'CONNOR - EMPCA itself hasn't been updated in nearly three decades. It's the same piece of legislation, fundamentally, as it was back in 1994. Has any preliminary scoping work been undertaken on a review?

Ms WILSON - Through you, minister, there are a number of amendments that my team has identified with EPA and also based on some other stakeholder feedback, some minor amendments that we have - some we've developed previously and others that we add to, and put in a register for when the time comes to make amendments or do a review, we will feed

PUBLIC

that information into that, but I think it would be fair to say that a full scoping has not yet happened because of the timing issues and the other work that is going on.

Ms O'CONNOR - Would it be fair to say, through you, minister, Ms Wilson, that the amendments which have been put into that box that you described earlier have been driven by industry feedback and frustration with EMPCA and the requirements, outdated as they are, that it places on industry. Are they industry-driven amendments, potentially?

Ms WILSON - Through you, minister, and I might ask my GM if she's got any - GM of Environment, if she has any further advice on this, but my understanding is that the minor amendments, the sources, I guess, of advice and proposals have been regulators. So for example, the EPA, the former head of the EPA and the current head of the EPA. I don't believe, certainly work that we've been doing with industry that I've been - Jo and I have been doing more recently, and the EPA with industry have - that is not informing those minor amendments, because the work we're doing there is not about legislative change at the moment. We're saying a lot of the issues that you're talking about, we can actually address that through better guidance and guidelines and clearer processes, so through non-statutory means.

Ms O'CONNOR - So it would be fair to say, it's about streamlining approvals, isn't it -

Ms CRISP - Through you, minister -

Ms O'CONNOR - and speeding up approvals, rather than making EMPCA more robust?

Ms CRISP - Apologies.

CHAIR - Have you introduced our new people?

Ms CRISP - My name is Jo Crisp, and I'm the general manager of Environment. Some of you may recall that there were amendments that were made to EMPCA with the separation and clarification of the independent EPA being established, and so I'm going to scroll back into my memory, and I think it was 2021 and it also -

CHAIR - Something else was happening that year as well, if I recall: COVID.

Ms O'CONNOR - State election.

Ms CRISP - COVID, yes, and at that time also there was the ability to create environmental standards and technical standards - were inserted into EMPCA which has allowed us to create an environmental standard for marine finfish regulation, technical standards being created by the EPA as well, and it also clarified the director of the EPA's ability to be able to release data, so industry data that had been collected by the EPA, just making it really clear that they could release that as part of their role as the independent regulator. So EMPCA is definitely not perfect, and I think we all know that there are improvements that can be made to what was leading legislation at the time, but it's now 1999, I think, from recollection.

Ms O'CONNOR - It was 1994, I think.

PUBLIC

Ms CRISP - Yes, 1994. So there are definitely improvements that can be made, but as the deputy secretary pointed out, there are such significant reforms being undertaken at a national level that have implications for the state that the state must take into consideration with our legislation, and may need to, through the environmental assessment process, actually change legislation to take account of, so that we can have bilateral assessments that the state is undertaking, rather than duplication.

Ms O'CONNOR - Massive worry, to be honest: but anyway, here we are.

Ms CRISP - So the environmental legislation really needs to await - and be done -

CHAIR - So what you're saying, I think, is you're waiting for EPBC act to be embedded, yes?

Ms CRISP - That's right, implemented.

CHAIR - And once that's done, then the minister, to you - and I know you probably won't be minister at the time, but anyway, but that's the time at which you do a full review of EMPCA; and is there a genuine intent that that will occur?

Mr ABETZ - Look, I would need to reflect on that. I can't give you an answer this evening.

CHAIR - You can't bind a future minister, can you.

Mr ABETZ - No.

CHAIR - But as Treasurer, you might have a view; you will probably still be Treasurer. I don't know: that's a bit of a presumption, isn't it?

Mr ABETZ - You never know you're luck in this game. It's day by day, Chair.

CHAIR - But that's the reality, that you're waiting for that work to be embedded so that you understand the implication for Tasmania.

Mr ABETZ - It makes sense. This was indicated by the deputy secretary. A review of EMPCA would be a mammoth piece of work, and before we embark on that, given what's being suggested in Canberra, it's best to have a full line of sight as to what that legislation may do for environmental regulation.

CHAIR - We probably need to move on.

Mr ABETZ - Can I quickly give a supplementary answer in relation to the question about the recommendations supported by the government on the state of the environment? Six of the recommendations were supported, three recommendations were supported in part, six recommendations were supported in principle, and one recommendation was noted. If my maths is correct, that deals with all 16 of the recommendations.

CHAIR - Thank you for the update. We will move on then to 7.2 Analytical Services.

Output Group 7 - Environment

7.2 Analytical Services

CHAIR - Do you have any questions there?

Ms GLADE-WRIGHT - It was not a great question: can you explain the operational efficiencies again?

CHAIR - Are you still going to deliver the same services? Level of service.

Ms THOMAS - In Analytical Services.

Ms WILSON - Through you, minister, if we just clarify the question, you didn't want me to talk through all of that?

Ms GLADE-WRIGHT - No, just for Analytical.

Ms WILSON - I will just repeat one of the points I made in previous sessions and that is that notionally, at this point until we have our budget sustainability plan finalised, every area has been allocated a sort of a notional operational efficiencies to their particular outputs. Analytical Services Tasmania (AST) is no different. It needs to contribute to the savings. I will just make the point though that AST does charge and keep revenue for some of its testing it does as part of its service for public health and EPA and others, but it does charge industry and other clients and bids for contracts, so it does have a revenue stream that allows it to manage and draw on as well. But final amounts of operational efficiencies haven't been landed and finalised yet.

CHAIR - Just on Clare's question there, there is a revenue stream, but obviously that doesn't cover the full operations. Under the descriptor of this portfolio and this output group, the decrease in Analytical Services reflects operational efficiency. The question I go back to is that you provide a lot of services to state government entities, et cetera. Is that going to be cut back? How are you going to continue to deliver the necessary services within the constrained budget?

Ms WILSON - Through you, minister. We can bring the manager of AST up here if you need to, but if you look at the performance measures, the target for 2025-26, for example, of jobs reported on time is 75 per cent. As of 31 March 2026, the percentage of jobs on time was actually over 80 per cent. This is an improvement of what was originally forecast and is largely as a result of AST's investment in equipment and increased capacity, increased oversight of large projects, and improvements to work processes. Furthermore, AST is expecting a reduction in the number of tests submitted during 2026-27, as reflected in the lower analyses-performed target for 2026-27.

CHAIR - Why? What sort of things are you not testing?

Ms WILSON - I think we might bring Damien to the table. This is quite a bespoke specialist area and Damien is very experienced has a very deep knowledge.

CHAIR - Maybe he's put in place a lean system. Have you got a lean system in the office?

PUBLIC

Mr NORMAN - Damien Norman, Manager Analytical Services Tasmania, and yes, lean systems is one of the things we do tend to look at. Operational efficiencies includes keeping our equipment up to date and making sure that our equipment - I'll give you an example, actually. So, we have equipment that will test a certain number of samples and where we've got space and room and samples to go on that, we can buy equipment that can basically process more samples.

CHAIR - That's when you update your equipment, that's what you're saying?

Mr NORMAN - Yes. So, those kinds of simple efficiency gains. We also have efficiency gains on our workflows, so we're a very process-orientated organisation. That's great, it enables us to look at processes and find better ways to do those. And, where we have large projects, for example, making sure that we have proper oversight of those and that they're driving along well.

CHAIR - How many staff have you got in the branch?

Mr NORMAN - At the moment we've got about 53, I think, or 54 heads, not all full-time, but yeah, about that.

CHAIR - How many FTEs, do you know how many there are?

Mr NORMAN - I'd be guessing, but it's in the high 50s, I would suggest.

CHAIR - Is there expectation for staff reductions to achieve these savings?

Mr NORMAN - I should say, through you, minister, but -

Ms WILSON - Excuse me, so, through you, minister, the principles that I explained in the previous hearings around our budget sustainability plan apply.

CHAIR - That's right we've got to wait for this magic document.

Ms WILSON - I can talk you through those again, if - no.

CHAIR - This is why it needs to be made public you see because how's anyone going to know?

Ms WILSON - There are no FTE numbers landed on at the moment. As I said, Damien's area will be looking for efficiencies and to do things better and smarter, just like every other area and that will be subject to further work and analysis.

CHAIR - But, minister, if Damien's required to buy newer and shinier equipment to perhaps process double the number of tests, that doesn't come from nowhere. So, is there an adequate budget to do that, to increase those efficiencies? You've got to spend money to save money in that case.

PUBLIC

Mr ABETZ - Look, that is often the case and I, in fact, outlined that in my budget speech that with some of the, say, long-term savings, you might have initial upfront costs, but those sort of matters are management decisions for the secretary of a department.

Mr NORMAN - Excuse me, through you, minister, the retained revenue from that external work, the majority of that goes towards those pieces of capital equipment.

CHAIR - You use your own source revenue to do that?

Mr NORMAN - We do, which is part of the model. So, that funds the capability that we then provide for the State Service and those external stakeholders.

CHAIR - Going to put your prices up?

Mr NORMAN - We do put our prices up regularly and prices will be going up by CPI.

Ms WILSON - Through you, minister, I'll just mention -

Mr ABETZ - I think the government overall has a review of all these charges and fees and that will be determined on a case-by-case basis for these sort of matters. Cost recovery is something we are looking at.

CHAIR - Well surely there would already be a cost recovery here for, you know, external -

Mr NORMAN - Through you, minister, yes, certainly.

Mr ABETZ - Good, good, well done.

CHAIR - One would have expected that at the very least.

Ms O'CONNOR - You're going to review royalties and licence fees, minister?

Mr ABETZ - Right 47.09 full-time equivalents, is that right, in March 2026?

Ms WILSON - Yes, as of March.

CHAIR - March this year?

Ms WILSON - Yes.

CHAIR - More? Anything else on Analytical Services? If not, we'll move to Cassy's favourite, threatened species.

Output Group 7 - Environment

7.4 Threatened Species

Ms O'CONNOR - Minister, NRE is yet to release any report of the results of the orange-bellied parrot tracking survey data from 2025, and we touched on this briefly earlier today. When will that report be released, and why the delay?

Mr JACOBI - Through you, minister, the environment team, threatened species team, have done some amazing follow-up work following the previous survey. I was presented with that information last week in it's draft form and the intention is to finalise that draft information, provide it to the minister and release it within the coming month.

Ms O'CONNOR - Thank you, Mr Jacobi. Are you stating at the table that the tracking survey data from last year was only presented to you last week?

Mr JACOBI - No, this is the new data that has been undertaken over the course of the last, I think, six to nine months, which has looked very closely at the tracking of a number of orange-bellied parrots along the west coast, which revealed some quite new, very interesting information that I think will be of great interest in terms of the further research work that needs to be done. The team will release that data imminently in a report.

Ms O'CONNOR - The team will release that data when?

Mr JACOBI - The team will release that data imminently in a report, it just finalised the report now for release.

Ms O'CONNOR - Okay. Are you able to indicate to the committee what that tracking survey data is telling us, in board terms?

Mr JACOBI - I think we could bring Rachael Alderman to the table to provide some broader indications. But it has -

CHAIR - It's as revolving door.

Mr JACOBI - This is very technically specialised area and, if we're going to talk about the nature of the findings, it would be better if Rachael did that.

CHAIR - Perhaps if I could ask you to introduce yourself when you sit down?

Dr ALDERMAN - Sure. Rachael Alderman, Director (Threatened Species and Biodiversity) in the environment business unit. In relation to what the orange-bellied parrot tracking data, so far we've had the interim report that was published last year and that was on the results of the 2024 tracking campaign - birds leaving for 2024. We've since then undertaken a whole new tracking campaign on the 2025 migratory season, so birds departing Melaleuca for 2025 up to their migratory grounds over winter.

The report that the secretary was referring to is consolidating both of those datasets, updating it all, analysing it in great detail. What's going to be coming out and made publicly available will be both a report that's describing the findings and the outcomes of that data, as

PUBLIC

well as publishing the location estimates on our Natural Values Atlas and also linked to the LISTmap, so all of that will be available.

In terms of the findings from the second tracking season, I guess without giving away the punchline before the report is made publicly available, there's nothing in these outcomes that we haven't already sort of seen through the first report that was published, which is confirming what we already know about how birds migrate and broadly where they go, but we are learning some really interesting details about timing and nocturnal flight and some other characteristics that are really valuable.

Ms O'CONNOR - Thank you.

CHAIR - They fly in the nighttime, don't they?

Dr ALDERMAN - Yes.

Ms O'CONNOR - What is the tracking data telling us about numbers and the potential for survival of this critically endangered species?

Mr ABETZ - Wait for the report, I dare say, but reveal what you can.

Ms O'CONNOR - Well, I'm not sure that's reasonable. There's a report there that's with the agency -

Mr ABETZ - But it's draft only.

Ms O'CONNOR - and the committee should know in broad terms what it says.

Mr ABETZ - We just want to keep you in suspense.

Ms O'CONNOR - You're just being annoying. That's what you're doing.

CHAIR - I think it goes both ways on this actually.

Mr ABETZ - Nice to know I'm getting an affect.

CHAIR - Is there anything you can reveal?

Dr ALDERMAN - Absolutely. Through you, minister, I guess there's two elements to it. The tracking data itself, one tiny component of orange-bellied parrot program work, it's only two years, tiny numbers of birds in reality, so we're still dealing with really limited sample sizes. That's why it's - but this is really important work for us to be doing to understand where birds are going and what is causing the low numbers that we're seeing in the wild. So, it's a long-term game. Each time we do a new round of tracking, we learn something new, and it adds to our understanding.

The other big ongoing component of the program has been the monitoring and management into activities at Melaleuca. That's where we're getting the really detailed data about numbers of birds, their survival and their breeding successes, and the like. There's sort of two complementary pieces of work that are all building on our picture.

PUBLIC

Ms O'CONNOR - Okay thank you, Rachel. Yes, and what is that work telling us about numbers and survival prospects, and if you reflect on what the most recent work both at Melaleuca and the tracking data is telling us, where is the bird, in terms of its survival prospects.

Dr ALDERMAN - I would say that we are still very much dealing with a bird on the edge. I'd say we have learned so much over the decades of work that we have been putting into this programme collectively, the royal 'we', there's lots of people that have been involved over the years, obviously. But each year we are seeing incremental successes, and we can't stop the actions that we are currently implementing, both in terms of our captive support, and the work we're doing on the ground at Melaleuca. But we're in it for the long haul, I suppose, one has to be for these kinds of projects. Each year we do continue to feel like we're getting a step closer.

Ms O'CONNOR - What a shame then, Rachel, that funding for the NRE's Orange-Bellied Parrot Migration and Tracking Program has been cut, and this is a question for the minister. Here we've heard about a species that is found nowhere else in the world, but in Tasmania and on the coast of Victoria, on the edge of survival, and the government you're a part of has cut funding for the scientific migration and tracking work. Do you think that's acceptable?

Mr ABETZ - I would have to know all the details in relation to it, to be able to offer a comment.

Ms O'CONNOR - I put to you a really a philosophical question, rather than -

CHAIR - \$50,000.

Ms THOMAS - Funding for the line goes up, and down, and down.

CHAIR - But you look on -

Ms O'CONNOR - Yes, but that's not for the Orange-Bellied Parrot Migration and Tracking Program.

Mr ABETZ - Core funding is still made available, I understand with the breeding program as well - that's Taroona, is it?

Mr JACOBI - That's at Five Mile.

Mr ABETZ - Yes.

Ms O'CONNOR - So how much state funding is allocated to Orange-bellied parrot research, and management? In this financial year -

CHAIR - We're looking for that; there's also \$50,000 in capital investment for that. Is that to buy their little backpack so you can track them?

Mr JACOBI - Through you, minister, Rachel can answer that.

PUBLIC

Dr ALDERMAN - Through you minister, there was a discrete funding commitment made a few years previously, that did combine tracking work, but also some capital investment to improve the captive facilities we have out at Five Mile. That finite funding has ceased, or has expired, those two years of the funding. But being an adaptive programme, we're going to continue to work on the areas that are yielding the greatest output for this species. The tracking work is incredibly important, and we make choices about where and how we allocate our time in the broader program. The broader programme consists of a whole range of activities. We have actually deployed another round of transmitters on, this last year's, on the 2026 migration.

CHAIR - It's their little backpack's, Cassy.

Ms O'CONNOR - I wish I could be humoured by anything to do with the fate of this bird, but I can't be. Minister, we talked earlier and in fact it was with your colleague, Mr Duigan, in the Parks portfolio, I think. Now we know that the state, and I haven't had an answer to the question about how much funding in this year's budget's going to orange-bellied Parrot conservation, and we will wait for that -

CHAIR - In total you want, Cassy?

Ms O'CONNOR - In total, in this year's budget, but what we understand is that the Robbins Island Wind Farm developer now has to fund orange-bellied parrot conservation.

Do you agree, minister, it would be appropriate and desirable for NRE to continue its monitoring of orange-bellied parrots, if nothing else, to make sure that the work that ACEN is undertaking is robust given that, I mean, it is sort of arguable that ACEN has a vested interest in minimising the impact of its operations on this critically endangered species.

Mr ABETZ - Look for a start if I got the message right, \$1.4 million is being spent in 2025-26, businesses usual.

Ms O'CONNOR - That's last year.

CHAIR - And what about this year though, I think the question was what funding is there this year?

Ms O'CONNOR - For orange-bellied parrot conservation?

Mr JACOBI - Through you, minister. I think we will take that on notice.

Mr ABETZ - Yes, take that on notice.

Ms O'CONNOR - I mean, you'd know. Someone sitting across from us at the table would know the answer to that. Mr Jacobi would know.

Mr JACOBI - We'd need to look at salaries and operating and do a break down of salaries and operating, to provide you with an accurate figure.

Ms O'CONNOR - Okay. Can we get an update on the Maugean - well, first of all, is there an operational, orange-bellied parrot recovery plan in place?

PUBLIC

Mr ABETZ - In?

CHAIR - In place.

Ms O'CONNOR - In place.

CHAIR - Is there a -

Mr ABETZ - In place.

CHAIR - Yeah.

Ms WILSON - Through you, minister. Yes, there is.

Ms O'CONNOR - Okay. Thank you. Can we have an update on the maugean skate captive breeding and recovery program in Macquarie Harbour? Can we have it confirmed that it's been largely unsuccessful, sadly? I don't think there's been much breeding from the male who was transplanted back into Macquarie Harbour, but I could be wrong there.

Dr ALDERMAN - Through you, minister. I would say the work to date has actually been hugely successful in terms of the captive component, we're talking, yes? We've gone from not knowing if it was possible to have and house skate in captivity, to successfully collecting eggs from the harbour, being able to hatch those in captivity and produce viable offspring that are now at reproductive age.

We've successfully taken live adult animals out of the harbour and been able to rear them in captive conditions that aren't like the harbour and then to re acclimate them back to be released back in the harbour.

CHAIR - There's nothing quite like the harbour. You can't really recreate the harbour.

Dr ALDERMAN - The scientists at IMAS have actually been doing, not 100 per cent, obviously, but challenging the skate, putting them in conditions that have the same sort of oxygen levels and temperatures so that they are in the same sorts of conditions. Recently, as it was reported in the media, the two remaining adults were released and this is very much a sort of a trial to understand, to learn through all the different methods. In that regard, it's been a success.

What the next steps are in a captive setting is still being worked through, whether we need to have an ongoing captive population for the skate in the current form. Do we scale it up? Do we scale it down? All those kinds of conversations are still dependent on a whole range of other inputs, but to date, very successful research and development in the captive skate space.

Ms O'CONNOR - Thank you, Rachel. Do we have an understanding of what the Maugean skate's population is in Macquarie Harbour? Through you, minister.

Dr ALDERMAN - Similar to, I guess, the orange-bellied parrot discussion, we're still continuing to learn, and we're learning a lot each time. I guess we're getting closer to having a more robust estimate. IMAS have been doing their monitoring with the gill netting over not

PUBLIC

very many years. It's only been four or five years in succession and that's not really enough data to give you a confident trend about the actual numbers, but it is giving us an index.

Ms O'CONNOR - What's the index?

Dr ALDERMAN - The most recent monitoring campaign, and IMAS is soon to be publishing their report for 2025, is actually showing the skate are back up to levels pre the 2014 baseline.

Ms O'CONNOR - What's that?

Dr ALDERMAN - It's not a number. This is an index; it uses catch per unit effort (CPUE), so it's the number of skate caught per unit of amount of effort, setting nets.

Ms O'CONNOR - Who catches skate? So it's part of the research, the skate are caught?

Dr ALDERMAN - Yes. So IMAS, yes. NRE Tas fund IMAS to keep this monitoring work going each year.

CHAIR - They survive being caught though, don't they?

Dr ALDERMAN - Absolutely. IMAS have done some very rigorous methods. It's all going through animal ethics. They've refined the capture methods and this is our long-term - and again, it's not that very many years, but we're building on it. This is our long term dataset for the skate, showing numbers that relative to 2014 - which was a baseline year, then there was a big gap before IMAS recommenced their monitoring. There were a couple of years where the numbers went down, and that created concern, and it was a justified concern, and in the last three years, I believe this will be available online, the numbers have - the index has come back up again.

Ms O'CONNOR - Thank you, and through you, minister, you're talking about numbers there, so you must have an idea of what the numbers are.

Dr ALDERMAN - That was my slip up to use the term 'number'. It is -

Ms O'CONNOR - There would have been a baseline number in 2014, and what - through you, minister, what we're being told here is that, at some level, we're back to close to baseline. Is that a correct interpretation of what you've said?

Dr ALDERMAN - Yes.

Ms O'CONNOR - So, is it not possible to apply an index metric and give indicative numbers of skate in Macquarie Harbour?

Dr ALDERMAN - The catch per unit effort and the gill netting is one data source, and that's not going to give numbers: can't do it. There is an estimate using capture-mark-recapture which I can go into if you like, but there has been an attempt to do that way back when, and that yielded a population estimate ranging from - we're kind of making this up - but many thousands from down here to all the way up here, so it wasn't very useful. The number could

PUBLIC

have been anywhere in there. That's been the only estimate really put out there available around skates, so fewer than several thousand, but beyond that -

Ms O'CONNOR - So, the estimated population on the index that you have is somewhere fewer than several thousand, so the correct translation?

Mr ABETZ - I have a document here telling me 4102, to be exact, last time I put my head underwater and counted, but I'm not sure how relevant that figure is.

Dr ALDERMAN - And I would say that that's an estimate that no - we don't want to be putting too much weight on yet because it's got very wide confidence intervals to be almost - not meaningless, but it could be anywhere from 1000 to 8000, if that makes sense.

Ms O'CONNOR - Thanks, Rachael. What was the rough baseline in 2014? Do we know?

Dr ALDERMAN - From the CPUE measure, sorry, the gill netting which was the index?

Ms O'CONNOR - Yes. Well, whatever was the best available evidence to point to a population number in 2014.

Dr ALDERMAN - I would have to look up the number from around the 2014 that was a population estimate. That's easy to obtain, but I would just note that, generally speaking, there's not a huge amount of confidence in it. There is one other point to make, that through the broader work of the recovery team, CSIRO and IMAS are together working on a new technique using genetic sampling that is going to yield, we hope, much more confident estimates of the actual population size, and that's what the recovery team are looking at for population size, the gill netting.

CHAIR - So are you seeing, like, juveniles as well as adults and little baby fish, little fry as well, when you're out there looking for them - they're called fry, just for those who don't come from the country.

Ms THOMAS - I know plenty about Maugean skates, thank you.

CHAIR - But are you seeing like a full range of ages when you're looking at the catching program?

Dr ALDERMAN - So, with the gill netting, they are size selective in what you catch. So, typically, they're only going to be catching the adults.

CHAIR - But are they seeing younger ones?

Dr ALDERMAN - Yes. So smaller animals are being detected in a range of methods, which is confirming for everybody that recruitment is occurring.

CHAIR - So they're breeding in Macquarie.

Dr ALDERMAN - Yes, in Macquarie Harbour, yes there is - there are several lines of very confident evidence that the skate are breeding in the harbour.

Mr ABETZ - Nature at work.

CHAIR - We might need to move on, we're not going to get climate change. We'd better do climate change.

Output Group 7 - Renewables, Climate and Future Industries Tasmania

7.2 Climate Change

Ms THOMAS - Minister, in the past two years the Climate Change Office has delivered Tasmania's Climate Change Risk Assessment, six sectoral emissions reduction and resilience plans and the Emissions Reduction and Resilience Road Map 2024-2029. Each of these documents clearly identifies escalating risks to Tasmanian communities and calls for increased investment and coordinated action; but despite this, it appears funding for the Climate Change Office is projected to fall dramatically from \$9.482 million in 2025-26 to just \$1.641 million -

Ms O'CONNOR - Scandalous.

Ms THOMAS - by 2027-29. Given this is what is projected in the forward Estimates, minister, how does the government expect Tasmanian communities, businesses and local governments to build resilience to climate change in the face of such significant reductions in capacity and investment?

Ms PINTO - Through you, minister, I might just start by talking through a little bit of the changes in the funding profile and then talk about some of the programs that we've got. So, in terms of funding, there is a number of fixed-term funding initiatives that are within this output group that are ending in the current financial year that we are in. So, there was quite an amount of climate change action plan funding that is ceasing in this financial year, and there was also funding associated with the electric vehicle target for the government, and there are also - there was also some funding around the emission reduction loan scheme.

What we do have carrying forward into this coming financial year of 2026-27 is funding that is associated with responding to some of the risk profiles in the climate, particularly in relation to responding to flood impacts and other weather events, and how you recover, and the resilience associated with that. So, there's funding associated with that. That is in the 2026-27 year. So, in relation to your question in terms of how we are working across - and I will talk about it across government as well as across local government - one of the key areas of the Climate Change Office and the action programs you referred to - so, the action programs themselves look at a number of areas to build capability across, not only across government, but across local government. So, there's a number of initiatives that we have run, working with local government, to build their understanding and their ability to respond and adapt and have the understanding and capability to deliver with that.

We've also been running comprehensive programs across government to build capability in how the acknowledgement of risks that are identified in the climate risk assessment, how you can then respond to those. A lot of areas in the Department of Natural Resources and Environment Tasmania themselves look at that in a marine perspective, particularly across the agricultural sector. A lot of that work that has been occurring over the last three to four years has been about building that capability. A lot of the investment the government has already

PUBLIC

made to date has been for the purposes of building that capability, such that that can carry on in the way that those sectors across not just government, but across local government and businesses themselves, can respond.

Ms O'CONNOR - What about an answer to the question?

Ms THOMAS - Still a pretty big cut from even taking out the emission reduction scheme and the EV target. What was the third thing you mentioned - third big initiative?

Ms PINTO - The climate change action plan.

Ms THOMAS - Yes. Climate change action plan. So, even still, it's cut from \$3.2 million to \$1.7 million over the forward Estimates - pretty much halving. So, what, minister, will the government not be doing in the climate change space other than taking that out from that bigger amount of \$8.5 million is the estimated outcome for 2025-26. What is the government going to stop doing? Climate change isn't stopping happening.

Ms PINTO - Through you, minister, as I noted, there are a number of initiatives that are seeking to build capability across government -

Ms THOMAS - So, cost shifting across to other agencies or local government?

Ms PINTO - There are initiatives that are occurring across government that are not necessarily funded out of the climate change funding program. For example, in the energy space, there are initiatives that are in there to promote the reduction of energy use within the home. There are funds that are in the forward Estimates associated with reducing energy use in the home by providing access to funding for low-socioeconomic communities through the NILS program. There are also initiatives within the agricultural sector that are, I think, there are - I'm just trying to recall the name that, I will find one in a moment - but there are some across the agricultural sector, whereby we're seeking to look at adaptation in that sector and how they are able to adapt the way that they are undertaking their operations. We also have funding that's been allocated to TasFarmers to look at initiatives for the application of seaweed and how that can be used in the agricultural sector to deal with emissions.

CHAIR - The *Asparagopsis*?

Ms PINTO - Thank you. I used the more layperson's term -

CHAIR - To stop the cows from releasing so much methane.

Ms PINTO - because that term didn't quite come to me in the moment. But yes, thank you, Chair.

Ms THOMAS - Plain English.

CHAIR - Most of it comes from burping, contrary to what some people think.

Ms PINTO - Yes.

Ms THOMAS - Only country people know.

PUBLIC

CHAIR - Correct. That's exactly right.

Mr ABETZ - Well done.

CHAIR - You got to come from the country.

Ms PINTO - I think the key - there are a number of programs whereby we have - I'll give you another example, one of the extremely important elements across this sector is around information and having access to really detailed information. So, some of the funding that has been provided in the financial year, that we're just finishing now, has been provided to the University of Tasmania to undertake fine-scale climate projections. That's a really detailed body of work. What that seeks to do is to take the information that is available at a higher level and it takes it down to a far more granular level. Again -

Ms O'CONNOR - I'll just check - isn't that an extension of Climate Futures, which began in 2008?

Ms PINTO - Going to defer to my colleague here, if that's okay, through you, minister.

Ms O'CONNOR - It's a longstanding program; a longstanding body of work.

Ms PINTO - Sorry, I'm going to do that as well.

Dr RUSSELL - Climate Futures obviously came to fruition in 2010 and we're currently updating that in partnership with the University of Tasmania.

Ms O'CONNOR - So, it is Climate Futures work update?

Dr RUSSELL - Yes, an update. So, we're using CMIP6. There's three stages to that program. The first one has been completed and is a usability assessment. The second piece is the information and data and translating that. The third piece is, I think, where the rubber hits the road and that's that translation piece, so what do those climate change projections mean for you and your sector. Whether you're community, business, industry, running an aged-care facility, whatever that might be.

Ms O'CONNOR - With you and your family living on a wild land urban interface like Hobart.

Ms THOMAS - Is it fair to say, minister, that from what I'm hearing, the government had upsized the budget over recent years and now it's downsizing it back to where it was when? For climate change? If you're telling me that the bulked-up budget was for particular initiatives that are being distributed elsewhere or discontinuing, was there ever a time where the climate change budget was \$1.7 million?

Ms O'CONNOR - No, not when I was minister.

Ms PINTO - Through you, minister, I don't have that exact detail in front of me as to what it has been in prior years, but in responding to an earlier part of your question, certainly back when the *Climate Change Act* was amended in 2021, there were a number of key elements

PUBLIC

that were included into that act that put upon the government really important obligations to ensure - one of which is to review the act, which has only just been completed in this last period, to deliver frequent reporting every year, to establish the emission reduction and resilience plans, to undertake the risk assessment - there were a number of them.

In answer to your question, the government at the time of doing that amendment to the act committed a sizeable amount of funding to ensure that those significant bodies of work could be undertaken and that actions arising from them could be undertaken. It's a really broad program of work. So many areas across the Tasmanian sector - from households through to business through to local government, through to government itself - have been addressed through these comprehensive programs. In answer to your question in regard to the quantum, yes, there was a quantum of funding for the purposes of ensuring that what was amended in an act could be responded to in an expedient fashion with plans and actions and programs.

Ms THOMAS - To follow up from that, the independent review of the *Climate Change (State Action) Act* in 2025-26 identified substantial gaps in governance, adaptation planning, and progress towards emission reduction targets. This really is a question for the minister as to why hasn't the government committed to implementing key recommendations from that review of the act in 2025-26? Minister, do you know why the government hasn't committed to implementing key recommendations from the review of the *Climate Change (State Action) Act*?

Ms O'CONNOR - I bet you the government's not committed to a single recommendation of the seven in the Climate act review. Not one.

Mr ABETZ - I've been told and had my attention drawn to a brief that tells me that action plan investment across whole-of-government equates to \$250 million. We are continuing to implement the action plan and a number of key projects and legislative requirements to be delivered. A total funding for action plan initiatives under the climate change output is \$14.3 million. These funds have been allocated against projects identified in the action plan and the emissions reduction and resilience plans and will be progressed over 2025-26 and 2026-27.

CHAIR - That's when the funding drops off.

Ms O'CONNOR - Can we ask you, and perhaps we can put it on notice, for a detailed breakdown of those two expenditure items that you detailed before, because I suspect that there are things in there like native forest burning for energy or the accounted Marinus in there. It'd be good to have a breakdown.

Mr ABETZ - Yes, I'm happy to take that on notice.

CHAIR - A breakdown of that line item, is that what you mean?

Ms O'CONNOR - A breakdown of that statement that there's been millions of dollars spent on mitigation and adaptation.

Ms THOMAS - Well, that didn't answer my question, actually, minister, with respect I appreciate the information that you've provided, but do you know why the government hasn't

PUBLIC

committed to implementing any of the recommendations from the *Climate Change (State Action) Act* review that was done in 2025-26?

Mr ABETZ - I'd have to take that on notice, I'm sorry.

Ms THOMAS - Okay.

CHAIR - Maybe there's got to be somebody that may be able to assist.

Mr ABETZ - Oh, sorry unless somebody does have information.

Ms PINTO - Through you, minister, I will check with my colleagues in relation to the prior question of the \$250 million that we may have provided that information at a prior budget Estimates hearing, so, we might just check that though during the session. But, in response to your question -

CHAIR - We have five minutes left of this session.

Ms PINTO - Yes, sorry, in response to your question, which was in relation to the recent independent review of the act, if, with the grace of the Chair and through you, minister, I might just give a little bit of information about that review and its findings, and then in response to the government's response to those findings, I will also include -

Ms O'CONNOR - Can I just check you there, because we have five more minutes in this output and we can read the review document, so we don't need an overview of the review. Thanks.

Ms PINTO - One thing I will make note on the record is that the review determined that the act provides clear and stable legislative framework within Tasmania and is well supported by longstanding leadership in climate policy. That's an extremely important finding from that review.

As the honourable member noted, there were a number of recommendations. There were seven recommendations that were made as part of that review. At the moment, the government has been acting closely, working with the Climate Reference Group. The Climate Reference Group has a number of key members across industry and government. I will ask my colleague in a moment to refer to the members. We've been working very closely with that Climate Reference Group to unpack those recommendations.

One of the key things that has been identified is that the robustness of the legislation and the actions that are being undertaken at the moment are key foundations to respond to those recommendations. As an example, recommendation one which relates to the government establishing an independent body to oversee, there is already as I noted, a Climate Reference Group. It is well represented across key stakeholders across Tasmania. Some of the initiatives associated with responding to that would include review of the terms of reference and the transparency of the minutes and reports that are engaged with that group.

In terms of the second recommendation, which is to replace the legislative four-year review cycle to a 10-year review cycle, the government is inclined to maintain the current four-year cycle through the legislative review.

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Through you, minister, I could go through the recommendations in detail.

CHAIR - No, we won't have time for that.

Ms PINTO - I acknowledge that.

Ms THOMAS - Can I ask that that information be tabled or provided for the committee?

CHAIR - Perhaps the rest of the response would be helpful if we can do that.

Ms O'CONNOR - Okay, just a couple of things. I noted what you said before about the Climate Office working to build capability across local government. I will just note to the minister that the Local Government Association of Tasmania, two years in a row now has put in a budget submission seeking about half a million dollars to have a climate capability officer that works across local government, particularly on their adaptation planning. For two years now that funding application has been rejected. But also, when we talk about the robustness of the legislation, it's done nothing to bring down emissions. There's ineffectual adaptation planning -

Ms O'CONNOR - That's been identified by the review, and one of the key things that it recommends is an independent advisory body to government, which is not this body. Minister, do you recognise the importance of having really contemporary climate change legislation that drives lowering emissions, because no emissions have come down in nearly 30 years, but also that drives adaptation planning because at the moment it is ad hoc and uncoordinated and it's not going to keep Tasmanians safe.

Mr ABETZ - What I can do, Chair, is to table the breakdown of the \$250 million to which I referred to previously which I understand was a point in time in 2023. I table that which shows activities across a whole range of government areas, totalling \$250 million.

CHAIR - With the money -

Ms O'CONNOR - How about just addressing your mind to the question about having contemporary, effective climate change legislation, which the review has suggested we don't have and that it needs improving.

Mr ABETZ - I will leave that for further consideration by the government.

Ms O'CONNOR - You don't think it should be a priority of government to have a really contemporary piece of climate change legislation that lowers our emissions and drives proper adaptation planning?

Mr ABETZ - My answer remains.

Ms O'CONNOR - What a shame.

CHAIR - Looking at the time, minister, we thank you for your time. You don't have anything else to provide for the committee before we finish?

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Mr ABETZ - No.

CHAIR - We will write to you with the questions you've taken on notice that you haven't been able to respond to as yet. Thank you for your time.

Mr ABETZ - Thank you.

The witnesses withdrew.

The committee adjourned at 9.16 p.m.