

Meg Webb MLC:- Reply Speech to the State Budget 2023-24

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Excerpt:

[11.59 a.m.]

Ms WEBB (Nelson) - Mr President, I rise to make my response to the state Budget and I have been very pleased to be listening to the contributions of other members and thank them for it. Even when I was not in the room, I was listening to every contribution from my office. We have certainly heard some interesting comments and analysis, and I will add mine.

I make this response to a budget I regard as our first genuinely post-pandemic budget. This is where we see the end of the specific COVID-19 allocations and provisions made for extra spending. Having said that, we can still see the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in this Budget. Most superficially, it looms as an ongoing challenge on the financial front as a significant contribution to the debt we are carrying as a state. Sadly, it is my observation this Budget embodies quite starkly, as a carry-over from our COVID-19 pandemic, the failure to learn from that pandemic about the centrality of addressing inequity in our state.

This Budget fails to demonstrate we have learned the lessons from COVID-19 that there are overwhelming benefits to our whole community when we ensure no-one is left behind, when no-one is abandoned to struggle alone. Also, there is the COVID-19 lesson that investing in our public services is central to our community wellbeing. Despite the opportunity to learn those lessons from our COVID-19 experience in this Budget, I fear we find our state reverting to and further cementing inequity in our community - the two Tasmanias, if you will - alongside that eroding our public service through blanket cuts, at a time of escalating need.

This Budget, in its lacklustre return to a damaging pre-COVID-19 approach, locks in the downward trajectories for our state on some outcomes in key areas of health, education, housing, cost of living and more. Those are the areas that determine whether Tasmanians are having a good life, whether Tasmanians are able to be happy, healthy and fully participating in their communities, where the Tasmanian children are nurtured and have the opportunity to thrive. This Budget is absent of transformational positive change for our state that would be needed to change our downward trajectory on those key foundations for a good life for all Tasmanians. I reflect on the Premier's words in taking office in April last year, as we have now had a further 12 months by which to measure him against the commitments he made at that time.

In a media release on 8 April 2022, Mr Rockliff undertook this:

... to lead a government with integrity, a government that is courageous, accountable, delivers on its commitments, but above all I will lead a government with heart ...

Further, the Premier stated that he had a vision for Tasmania that it was 'to be a place where everyone feels valued, included, encouraged and supported to be the best they can be'. I think there were many Tasmanians, including in this place, that felt hopeful when they heard

that from the new Premier in April last year. I wonder how many of those Tasmanians have found one year on that their hope has soured as the realities of this Premier's leadership and his Government's priorities and modus operandi have played out.

Rather than bringing a different approach to politics and political leadership in our state, the Premier has fallen heavily into replicating the worst inclinations of previous premiers. In the year since offering hope, Tasmanians have experienced numerous examples of autocratic decision-making, a continued entrenched allergy to transparency, and a lack of both ticker and heart.

As we have noted many times before, the state budget is more than a set of numbers on a page, a ledger in which to balance incoming and outgoing moneys. At its core, it is an important statement and expression of a government's priorities. A state budget tells us what and who this state government values and how it weighs certain outcomes against others, certain areas of need against others. While it is a well-worn sentiment I have stated in this place before, the truth of Mahatma Gandhi's words is inescapably that the true measure of any society can be found in how it treats its most vulnerable members.

This Budget is a statement loud and clear from the Government of who matters in this state, of whose needs are a priority and of who deserves investment and support. Let me tell you, 'spoiler alert', it is not the Tasmanian community's most vulnerable members.

I noted the commentary from a range of stakeholders after the release of this Budget, and at best I would characterise some of those comments as damning with faint praise. More commonly, consistent criticisms and serious concerns were raised.

You will not be surprised, Mr President, given my background before coming to this place, and my passion to see social justice and equity progressed in Tasmania, I am always interested to hear the assessment of the Budget from TasCOSS as the peak body in the community services sector and the key advocacy body for our most vulnerable community members.

I note the plain-speaking assessment from TasCOSS of this Budget, where it said:

... the goal of every budget must be to ensure all Tasmanians can afford the basics.

Regrettably, this budget fails that basic measure.

Further, from TasCOSS:

We had hoped to see measures such as accelerating the delivery of new social and affordable homes, a cap on rent increases and energy prices, investment in digital skills and affordability, greater investment in energy-efficient upgrades to keep energy prices down, and ensuring public transport is affordable and accessible for all Tasmanians.

However, for the more than 120 000 Tasmanians on inadequate incomes and the many more also doing it tough, this budget won't change much.

The Government certainly likes to crow about our strong economy at every opportunity, and according to the Government, we have 'notched up "more records than Elvis" in recent years'. However, as Dr Charlie Burton, the acting CEO at TasCOSS at the time, pointed out in the *Mercury*:

... over the same period, we've broken a number of other records.

Namely a record-high social housing waitlist and wait times, the biggest increase in homelessness in the country, the most unaffordable rents in the country, the highest electricity bills, and the worst levels of digital exclusion.

It's clear that simply relying on a growing economy and infrastructure spending has not trickled down to lift Tasmanians out of poverty. [OK]

He went on to say:

Now was the right time for a budget that invested directly in people.

And yet, that is not what we got. These sentiments echo exactly those same lessons that COVID-19 taught us. We were provided with the opportunity to learn that we need to invest in our most vulnerable and in our public service. In this Budget, we have tragically disregarded those lessons.

I wonder about the Government's labelling of this Budget. They have badged it as 'Building Tasmania's Future: Strong, Safe, Secure', which prompts the obvious question: strong, safe and secure for whom?

In the first instance, I am not sure that this Budget provides for a strong, safe or secure future for this Government itself. I have heard it observed that this Budget seems to be a plan for two years only, with lots of funding and investments for this year and the next, but dropping away in the forward Estimates. Usually in a budget we would expect to see a clear plan out across the full four years of the forward Estimates. I wonder why the Government would expect that it could fail to present a fully formed forward plan for our state in this Budget.

Could it be that this feels like a budget from a government not expecting to have responsibility for the out-years of the forward Estimates? I am afraid this looks like a budget from a government that is tired, has given up. That is highly concerning for community confidence in the governance of this state. How can a half-baked effort demonstrate to the Tasmanian people that they are valued, included, encouraged and supported?

To turn to some specific areas, I appreciate the analysis and comments provided by other members here on detail about the financial aspects of this Budget. I am not going to go into too much detail to repeat and cover similar areas - it is not my area of expertise in the first instance - and I appreciate the effort that has been put there by others.

I do note that for the fourth year in a row, we are facing an operating deficit; the money coming in will not pay for our operating expenses. We know that we have challenges looming. We have a GST revenue hit, apparently, of \$900 million over the four financial years, and in just a few short years, we know that we face that GST cliff with the end of the no-worse-off guarantee.

We are told that global headwinds are coming. The Treasurer's narrative is that this Budget is readying the state's finances for the challenges ahead, apparently to unlock opportunities and provide a business environment that generates continued growth and security. However, this Budget flags that the global economy will face a downturn, which is usually a time that government spending should go up in order to provide protection for the economy. Instead, what I have heard this Budget described as is it being more like an austerity budget, which takes us in the opposite direction and moves away from providing growth and security.

There has been lots of talk of debt, and it has been noted by many that we are looking at \$3.4 billion in debt in 2023-24, which is expected to reach \$5.6 billion in four years. The previous budget's fiscal strategy contained, as we have heard discussed also, an element or some rules relating to borrowing; that borrowing, interest payments and superannuation costs should be capped at 6 per cent of revenue. While it will be 6 per cent in this coming financial year, we know that this Budget presents forecasts that those elements will be exceeding that old rule from the budget, and blowing out to close to 8 per cent in the out-years. We are moving away from those previous rules that were there for the budget and I know the current Treasurer has commented on this that we are building a new fiscal strategy for a new context to rebuild fiscal buffers and grow the economy over time. I know that the Treasurer likes to point to the fact that Tasmania has the second-lowest borrowings per capita in Australia, and uses framing about arresting the growth in our net debt in a careful way.

Noting that, I also note that selective comparisons with interstate jurisdictions only tell part of the story. We have heard about that quite clearly from the member for Murchison in her contribution, that there are numerous ways we could be comparing ourselves more comprehensively or perhaps more honestly with other jurisdictions to reflect the current state we are in. I also note comments that were reported in the media from independent economist Saul Eslake, who talked about the fact that Tasmania could not necessarily afford to carry as much debt as relative to the size to its economy to other states due to its large unfunded superannuation liability, which is the highest per capita of all Australian jurisdictions.

I believe he described this as quite a considerable overrun in terms of this Budget, and I think the quote was that means that there are some harder decisions to be made in future budgets. Of course, that is not a problem in and of itself necessarily. Governments go into debt on a regular basis for good reason to grow the economy. Debt is appropriate if it is used to increase the productivity of Tasmanians and grow our economy in a way that is strategic and equitable. I am less concerned about debt per se, and more concerned about the priorities demonstrated in this Budget and the absence of a convincing strategic plan for our state into the future, particularly in the area of equity.

I feel there is some cognitive dissonance in this Budget also. The Treasurer has said that this Government will protect and grow public services, and we have previously heard from the Premier in relation to public services that, apparently, we can walk and chew gum at the same time. Yet in this Budget, we see a \$300 million cut to public services, labelled as an efficiency dividend. I think there is some cognitive dissonance there.

From 2024-25, the public sector agencies will be expected to trim \$300 million in spending over four years. I have heard across-the-board efficiency dividends, such as this, described as lazy budget cuts. A blanket efficiency dividend is not based on carefully working out where cuts can most effectively be made and targeting them there, or where to avoid

unproductive or damaging cuts and moving away from those. An across-the-board cut is a blunt instrument. The Government has taken some pains to say it will work to ensure essential services are not affected by this public service cut, and in these discussions, I am sure we will hear about the old front-line/back-line divisions, where apparently you can make cuts to parts that are hidden away in the shadows somewhere without affecting those in public-facing service roles. We know this is utter nonsense. There is no such thing as a front-line/back-line division that provides for cuts to be made without impact. Cuts affect frontline workers and service delivery. It is as simple as that. Cuts made behind the scenes in many instances put more pressure on those who are delivering services.

I also understand that in addition to the cuts mandated under this efficiency dividend, there will be other ways that the public sector will be put under pressure. This includes situations where indexation for agency funding may not have been sufficient to meet inflation. That, in effect, is a cut. In addition, there may be situations where there is a demonstrated significant increase in demand for government services which agencies are not being funded to meet; again, that is going to feel like a cut.

We know that one way an efficiency dividend may be achieved is through job losses or a freeze on recruitment. However, we also know there are not enough workers in key sectors such as health and education, and they are desperately trying to attract more in. Job losses or recruitment freezes will likely mean that various initiatives that are proposed and even funded in this Budget will be less likely to be implemented. Again, that might mean cuts to services or new initiatives not being fully realised.

It is interesting to look at the risks identified in the budget papers. It will come as no surprise to anyone who is paying attention in the state that everyone went straight to the Macquarie Point stadium as one of the potential risks in the state Budget. We are told that:

... the project may be subject to the same ongoing supply constraints and cost escalations as other major projects across both the public and private sectors are experiencing as a result of high levels of activity in the Tasmanian construction sector. [TBC]

No surprises there. Anyone would have imagined that cost overruns on that project would be a risk. We also note in the identified risks that the wastewater treatment plant relocation is expected to exceed the current estimate of \$140 million and, under the agreement with TasWater, the state Government has to pay any cost overruns. Again, an uncertainty and a likely increase in costs to the state.

Marinus Link, Battery of the Nation and the North West Transmission Developments are identified as risks in the Budget. The estimated cost is more than \$6.4 billion but we currently have no formal agreements on how much of that the state Government will pay - in fact, our community will pay.

Other risks that are included are rising interest rates - something that we are all well aware of; increasing health system demand - which I will speak about later; changes to GST calculations - which I previously mentioned; and things like reductions in revenue - for example, conveyancing duty from home sales is forecast to fall due to a weakening housing market.

There are other issues on the expenditure and the revenue side of risks, and the uncertainty of many of these aspects is all the more reason that we need to be attending to the resilience of our own state-generated revenue. It will probably be no surprise that today I will reiterate my call that it is well past time for meaningful and effective structural reform of Tasmania's taxation and revenue system - in the context of the economic challenges faced by our state, the growing inequality that is holding our communities back, and the stark realities of the cuts that this Budget presents. It is work that becomes more imperative with every year that it is neglected - not just tinkering around the edges, but comprehensive strategic review and reform.

The budget papers stress the need to increase the revenue we raise as a state, and they propose a 10-year target for that increase. We currently sit at about 32 per cent of revenue and the target is about 37 per cent. That target will not be reached without a significant change to our current approach. We are not going to accidentally stumble into it, and we are not going to get there by small tinkering - especially as this Government's tinkering tends to veer towards taking away state revenue by gifting land tax to property owners.

I will reiterate my description of the scope that I believe a purposeful, transformative taxation review could encompass. It could be a review of the state's narrow taxation and revenue base with the intention of seeking potential modern, equitable and efficient means to broaden it. The review could include whether the current mix and emphasis of the state tax and revenue base provides the stability and certainty necessary to deliver our important community services. It could also consider whether the current taxation and revenue mix supports, or risks undermining, modern public policy direction and demand including, for example, the potential impact of reducing or removing taxes on positives - such as employment - while redirecting tax focus onto damaging practices such as pollution.

A review could explore other incentivising taxes to encourage social and sustainable reforms. It would review any current revenue-forgone options presented within our current state tax and revenue mix - I am thinking about pokies here, which I will come back to later. Finally, it could identify any required transitional time frames and support, including funding to assist those most affected by any proposed reforms.

A courageous government would identify this as a priority and seek a way forward. I acknowledge that any suggestion of taxation reform presents considerable political risk to the Government or the Opposition. However, this Government is currently tackling another similarly politically risky area - local government reform. It has a model to refer to in navigating a way forward. A similar approach could be progressed; for example, with an independent panel of experts or another mechanism to achieve similar ends, at arm's length from the Government. Such a panel would not be constrained by political ideology and should be able to provide rigorous and credible options for open debate in this parliament. In the context of political power struggles between the major parties in this state, where too often 'no blow is too low' to land on each other, the success of our state is being held back on this. Tasmanians are being failed by the continued avoidance of meaningful taxation and revenue reform. Tasmanians deserve political leadership with the courage, capacity and conviction to prioritise our community success above cowardly political self-interest.

Infrastructure is big news in this Budget. We are looking at a \$5 billion infrastructure spend over the four years of the Budget and it includes the Macquarie Point stadium. I note, however, that we are still not entirely successful in delivering on our infrastructure plans. Of

the infrastructure spending promised last year, 73 per cent was delivered. I also note that infrastructure is weighted towards roads and bridges. In fact, roads and bridges outweigh all other infrastructure spending by a reasonable amount. However, that is not a bad thing. Roads and bridges are a public good that can be a very worthwhile infrastructure investment. However, it does feel a little bit like Groundhog Day, to see this Budget outlining investments in things like traffic congestion measures, park-and-ride facilities, and the Northern Suburbs Transit Corridor planning, design and early works. They all sound like things we have funded many times in the past but we have not necessarily seen anything much come to fruition.

I wonder how much longer we can keep putting forward some chickenfeed investments into things like traffic congestion and the Northern Suburbs Transit Corridor before we see something tangible that the community will benefit from in real time, day to day.

Much has already been said about the proposed Macquarie Point stadium and precinct. I have no doubt that much more will be said in this place on the topic in the months, and possibly the years, to come. I do not intend to exhaustively prosecute a case today for or against the proposed stadium project or the AFL agreement. I note the Budget allocates some funding towards these projects. However, I believe there are more unanswered questions than confirmed details at this point on things such as: how, precisely, that money will be spent; what the final elements of the full proposal will be; what the final costs of the whole project will be; which elements of the project will be funded from which sources of funding; and what extra costs there will be in ensuring the Macquarie Point site is fit for purpose. That is just to mention a few of those unanswered questions. As an elected member of this place and as a member of the Public Accounts Committee presently involved in an inquiry, this is a matter I am giving a great deal of attention to currently. The only other further comment I make at this time is that it is incredibly sad we find ourselves so divided on this as a state, when we all know the idea of a Tasmanian AFL team was such a unifying one. I regard this as a categorical failure of political leadership from the Premier and this Government. The Premier and his Government did not have the courage of their convictions to make the case to the Tasmanian people with openness, honesty and respect. Instead, we had autocratic decisions made, hidden deals and divisive name-calling from our Premier. We have seen a rejection of the voice, views and priorities of the majority of the Tasmanian people.

The final comment I will make today on this is that we would likely be having a very different conversation on this stadium matter if it was proposed for a different site. Part of the offence of the current proposal is the careless way previous work and plans for that site were discarded. Heartfelt concerns about the impact on the Cenotaph and the veteran community were dismissed and the community was provided with no process to fully consider the stadium proposal against other possible development of the site, in order to weigh up a public good of each and all options.

Macquarie Point is easy to dismiss as a wasteland at this time, but we know that it is a unique piece of waterfront CBD-adjacent public land in our capital city. It is unique. Whatever we do with that area will be a significant place-shaper for Hobart and given that, how dare the Premier presume to dictate a foregone conclusion with no genuine and honest conversation with the community.

The Budget has \$60 million over three years for an AFL high performance centre. I understand this is for training grounds and facilities for a club. Apparently, the location is yet unknown, although there is already speculation. The Government has said that a process is

underway for site selection, but we have scant information provided at this time about that process for site selection. That is a problem. We need to understand what will be the decision-making process to determine the location for this facility. In a way, this is a facility that is largely gone under the radar because all of the focus has been on the proposed Macquarie Point stadium. Who is currently involved in this decision-making process on site selection for this AFL high performance centre for the training grounds the club will need? What is the time line of the decision-making process? This kind of uncertainty in the appearance of decisions being made behind closed doors excluding the community is exactly what will contribute to continuing to drive opposition to the whole shebang of the issue around AFL deals, stadium deals and a licence.

While we have a great deal of focus at the moment on the proposed Macquarie Point stadium, I am not sure we as a community realise that in total we are talking about three new AFL-sized grounds being required in and around Hobart under the AFL agreement on the Macquarie Point stadium and the two training grounds. My understanding is the training grounds comprise two full-sized ovals - one being bigger than the stadium ground itself. My understanding is these training grounds are expected to be co-located side by side such as the Perth example. I presume there would then be a need for car parking for a significant number of cars and facilities associated with the club also on site. I am happy to be corrected, but I am led to believe another factor in the location is the decision on the aspect of the grounds that normally it is expected they would run the main access of these two grounds north-south. I imagine that is especially important in Tasmania, because the sun is lower in the sky.

If those kinds of requirements are accurate - and I am happy to be corrected or better informed - then I suggest the two ovals and all those associated facilities will definitely not fit at Cornelian Bay, which is one of the speculated sites. Even one ground would not fit necessarily on that site, so we are ruling that out and I think the Government has perhaps ruled that out. If that is ruled out where are we looking instead?

Ms Rattray - There is plenty of room at Brighton.

Ms WEBB - Are we talking about a parcel of crown land? If not, I wonder how the Government proposes to acquire the land that might be required. Another key question is what planning assessment process that will utilise. We have heard from the Premier it will not be part of their Projects of State Significance process that the Macquarie Point proposal will be put through. Will it be under a regular planning scheme in whatever local government area it is allocated for? Will the Government seek to use the Major Project process for this facility?

One has to wonder if there is any question over the Government's ability to resolve the location of the training grounds and administrative base, does that put aspects of the whole agreement in jeopardy. My point here is more transparency is required and we need to hear from the Government about how this process is going to play out.

I will make a few comments in the area of health; I know others have covered this area in detail. I have been very pleased to hear other members speak quite strongly and passionately about the needs of the Mother and Baby Unit that is being lost from the St Helens Private Hospital closure and the necessity to better attend to those services and supports being provided within the public system. I add my voice to those sentiments already expressed.

I do not want to delve into too much detail in the area of health as I know it will be well interrogated during the Estimates process next week. I note next year there is a 9 per cent increase in health funding which drops to 4 per cent the year after and then to only 1.2 per cent the following year. That is concerning in light of the fact we have the impact of the efficiency dividends clicking in for the Health department at that time. We are certainly not expecting demand to drop.

Rather than go into big ticket items in the health area, there are actually three matters that I want to mention briefly in the area of health that are fairly small things but caught my eye.

The first one is preventative health which continues to suffer from significant underinvestment in this Budget. For those who may not be aware, or may wish to be reminded, to get the full benefit from preventative health investment it needs to be at least 5 per cent of the total Health budget in a jurisdiction. That is not a figure I have made up. That is an evidence-based measure and proven to be true in other jurisdictions. It means that if we want to fundamentally shift the health outcomes for our state to slow down, halt or even most optimistically, reduce the demand on our acute health system, we need to invest at least 5 per cent of our health money on preventative health. We all talk with concern about the increasing proportion of our overall state Budget that is going towards our health budget. It is quite scary but we will never change that on our current trajectory of spending in investment.

To shift that trajectory, we need to do something different and transformative. If I had to pick two things, it would be to boost spending on preventative health to above that 5 per cent marker of our health budget. The second thing, ultimately more impactful as a key social determinant of health, I would commit to housing every Tasmanian. That is a commitment I cannot believe a government in this state would fail to make. I will talk more about housing later.

The other matter I wanted to touch on in the health area is a modest one, but it one I was particularly pleased to see and I would like to be able to highlight it in my remarks today. That was the lived experience training and development hub being funded for the mental health and alcohol and other drug sectors. In the Budget \$450 000 has been allocated for partnership with the Mental Health Council of Tasmania and Primary Health Tasmania to train and support the development of lived experience workers in Tasmania, otherwise known as peer workers.

This is a great initiative to see supported. This will be a place where people can learn how to best harness and apply their own lived experience to help others who are going through many of the same things that they have and who are accessing many of the same supports and services that they have.

This will be an excellent opportunity for these two aspects of the health sector - the mental health and alcohol and other drugs sector - to work together to support the many Tasmanians who are choosing these peer worker roles, and to expand the opportunities for work in these roles. There is something beautifully optimistic and resilient about Tasmanians who have lived experience in these areas of addressing and overcoming the challenges in their lives, bringing that experience to provide support to others in their community. They should be well trained, well supported and well recognised for that valuable work.

The third matter that I will touch on in the health area is again just a drop in the ocean of this Budget. However, it is the thing that stood out to me as concerning, and it links in to some

remarks made by the member for Mersey in his contribution. I noted in the Budget that \$50 000, a tiny drop in a massive ocean, has been allocated in this Budget to support Men's Table, a grassroots men's mental health and suicide prevention initiative, to expand that across Tasmania. An amount of \$50 000 seems like a pittance for such an important and readily identified issue in this state. Of course, there are other, more generic, suicide prevention measures in place, but we know that men are at a much higher risk of suicide in our state.

We know that in the current context of cost-of-living pressures, including our housing emergency, there are likely to be people whose risk of suicide is being pushed and pushed and driven further. I cannot help but wonder about the overall investment to address risks such as these. I look at this initiative: \$50 000 is peanuts towards this initiative. I am sure it is going to be valuably used because these sorts of groups know how to make and stretch these modest investments as far as possible. I wish that we had seen much more targeted support in that area. I wish Men's Table, as an initiative, all the very best for their expansion across Tasmania with that \$50 000. I hope that next time we see that doubled, tripled, or quadrupled, and joined by other investments as well.

I will now move to cost of living. Regarding the cost of living, we have heard some statistics from TasCOSS. For those members who may have gone to the briefing provided by TasCOSS last Friday this will not be new statistics to hear. There has been an 11.8 per cent increase in electricity prices in the past year. We know there is a significant increase expected to be coming shortly. We know there has been a 22 per cent increase in the number of households in energy debt in the past year. That is information that we have received through OTER, the Office of the Tasmanian Economic Regulator. We know there are 47 000 Tasmanian households living in energy poverty. That is quite shocking.

In the Budget, we see that there are some measures directed towards this area. I looked in the Budget and there are investments towards electricity concessions. There is an additional \$40 increase in annual concessions - that is a CPI increase. It is not an increase to keep pace with the price rises that have occurred and are expected to occur. There is a \$40.6 million investment towards water and sewage bill assistance. There is \$45 million which I believe combines with an equal amount from the Commonwealth for an energy bill relief fund. For energy bill relief, there is \$250 each year for two years for concession cardholders. This will be helpful but it will be overtaken by the expected price rise that we have looming ahead of us.

Having noted those funding commitments, my comment on them is that essentially, while the measures are welcome, they are grossly inadequate. They are bandaid measures which do not staunch the bleeding let alone provide for healing. I note that calls from TasCOSS for a cap in energy prices have been ignored although it has been done before and it is warranted now.

Another key area in terms of cost of living is food insecurity. Again, we are presented with numbers: one in two Tasmanians are food insecure due to rising costs of living. That is what UTAS research tells us. One in five households regularly skip meals and go hungry; that has tripled in the last two years. Again, that is from UTAS research. Only 10 per cent of people in food stress access emergency relief. 26 000 Tasmanian children are severely food insecure. They have not had enough to eat in the last year.

Mr Valentine - That is a lot of kids when you line them up in a row.

Ms WEBB - That is a hell of a lot of kids, 26 000. That is from research by Foodbank.

I note the measures in the Budget, in this area: \$2 million to support the Food Relief to Food Resilience Action Plan 2023-25; an additional \$180 000 per year to Gran's Van, Loui's Van and Missionbeat, who are providing emergency food relief out and about; and there is \$360 000 over three years from 2024-25 to continue the School Lunch program. These are all welcome measures but they are all grossly inadequate.

Where is the transformative plan to turn around the massive and increasing cost-of-living crisis in this state, and particularly, this food insecurity crisis? At the TasCOSS briefing last week that I attended, it was acknowledged that building resilience in the area of food insecurity is important. That is the focus of the action plan. It was also noted that it cannot be at the expense of greater effort to meet the immediate need, especially given how much that need is increasing so rapidly.

In fact, there was a comment from the sector that demand in this area of emergency food relief is growing so fast, that if they had funding, they could immediately double the support they provided and it still would not meet the demand. Unmet need in our community in accessing food, the most foundational of needs, is already excessive. It continues to increase and it is nowhere near adequately addressed in this Budget.

Speaking of foundational needs, I now turn my attention to housing. Again, it is an area where we hear figures all the time. It can be tempting and likely that we turn off to them after a while, particularly if we hear them repeated. I invite members, and anyone listening, to reflect on these figures with me and engage with them and what they mean in real terms.

Tasmania has the least affordable rental market in the country. There has been an 11.4 per cent increase in median rents in the past year, a 30 per cent increase since COVID-19. That compares with a 6.6 per cent increase in Victoria. Just 4 per cent of Hobart houses and 20 per cent of Hobart units are listed for rent at less than \$400 per week; 4 per cent of Hobart houses are listed at less than that. People on low incomes and people on welfare cannot afford \$400 a week.

We have 4603 families on our social housing waitlist; those are families on our waitlist. There are more people than that represented by that number. That is a record high for our state. The wait on that list is now at about 80.8 weeks, 80 weeks up from 21 weeks a decade ago when this Government took office. There has been a 63.5 per cent decline in new social housing supply since the first year of this Liberal Government in 2014. The average wait time of more than a year-and-a-half, the 81 weeks for social housing, is a massive blowout. Over 15 000 requests for help to homelessness services go unassisted. One third of those involve family violence.

That is the context. Those are the numbers I invite us not to switch off from but to put faces to. That is the context in which we look at this Budget and we look at the funding provided in it and the priorities demonstrated there.

There is funding in this Budget. Grant funding for Homes Tasmania to help deliver on that commitment of 10 000 new homes and units by 2032. We are told by the Government that Homes Tasmania is designed to help build homes faster because of its ability to borrow. As if the Government does not have the ability to borrow, but, there you go, some things but not

others. Yet, we have Housing Tasmania, let us see how we go with it. Housing Tasmania anticipates a total comprehensive income of \$330 million for the coming year.

While we have reshaped the architecture of those entities that deal with these issues, we have created Homes Tasmania and its remit. Since the last budget, the housing emergency has remained very central to the lives of far too many Tasmanians. Shelter Tasmania's media release - Shelter being the peak body for housing and homelessness services in this state - said:

To address this crisis out decision makers, need to put housing at the heart of every relevant policy including health and education, population, urban renewal and significant infrastructure projects.

It then went on to say this:

There is still a need to boost the essential supply of affordable and social rental homes and deliver a housing first approach. We need to see a housing target to match the State Government's population target. Shelter Tas advocates for 10 per cent of all dwellings to be social and affordable rentals.

Shelter's media release also said:

We need targets that deliver measurable changes to the number of Tasmanians living in housing hardship and facing homelessness.

I could not agree more. These ambitious targets that Shelter and the sector are calling for, and vulnerable Tasmanians are crying out for, are important. The Government keeps pointing to its own targets when it knows those targets will not address the need that is there and will not make transformative change and still is coming far too late.

I note investments in other sorts of supports around housing in this Budget. There are investments to the Safe Spaces over four years. That is a positive in that those spaces deliver important supports to people who are sleeping rough. I note there is flagged \$5.9 million to expand the Youth2Independence facilities, which is a really good investment. We could probably double that yet still not come close to meeting the need amongst our young people who are in insecure housing or homelessness and in need of that assistance as they are moving from youth into adulthood.

The Budget talks about \$38 million in wraparound services. That is interesting and includes some money, \$15.5 million or thereabouts, to Housing Connect. It includes \$80 million or so for short-term homelessness accommodation, crisis and transitional accommodation, just over \$2.5 million for longer term supportive accommodation and \$1.72 million to continue at the Hobart Women's Shelter's emergency response. Those are some of the elements involved in those apparent wraparound services.

One thing I can say for certain is the funding provided in each and every one of those spaces is nowhere near sufficient. The Government describes that investment in wraparound services as being to ensure those who need help are getting the services they need. I can guarantee you the funding allocated in this Budget does not do that. It ensures some people get the support they need and that is good. It by no means ensures those Tasmanians who need it, get that support. It will continue to mean we come nowhere near what is needed to meet

demand in our community. Where every time I see a media comment, from the minister responsible for housing, advising people who are in desperate straits in terms of their housing to contact Housing Connect to get support, my heart sinks. Not because Housing Connect and the organisations that provide support under that banner as part of the partnership are not incredibly dedicated and professional in what they do. In fact, it is near miraculous how they make the funding available stretch to provide the best support they are able. Not because I have any lack of faith at all in Housing Connect.

My heart sinks when I hear the minister say that because I know that when the Housing Connect phone rings with another request from a desperate, vulnerable Tasmanian seeking help to access affordable housing, in too many cases the only support the workers under those programs might be able to provide is some supportive company over a game of cards or chess. That is where we are at.

We know supply is the solution but the Government only want to stubbornly look at building new supply. This, while good, will not provide relief for the crisis for years to come. There is next to nothing in this Budget to provide immediate alleviation in the private rental market. Next to nothing. There are some efforts to put some additional funding into the Private Rental Incentives scheme and its enhancement initiative. The Private Rental Incentives scheme is limited in what it is already providing with just over 500 properties captured by that scheme. That is fine. For what it is, it is not a problem. We are enhancing it; again, not a problem but hardly going to make a ripple in actually alleviating the pain there in the private rental market at this time.

It is directing support and assistance that goes towards property owners in that sector and does nothing to help assisting dampening the out-of-control rental increases we see occurring. It disturbs me because while providing next to nothing in the big scheme of things in the way of immediately alleviating the current private rental market situation, the Government is refusing to contemplate straightforward evidence-based options available right now to boost supply in the private rental market and moderate the skyrocketing rents in that sector. These are measures that would open up homes for people homeless right now, to keep people in homes now that are at risk of becoming homeless due to rising rents. The added bonus is the measures would cost nothing to the Government and, in fact, in one instance, would generate revenue. There is no excuse for not pursuing these measures. These are levers available, waiting to be pulled. This Government is entrenched in its refusal to go near them. It is about priorities and ideology.

The two measures that would immediately assist in dampening the failed private rental market, where rents continue to race to the top unchecked, would be these. First, a rental price increase cap. In Ireland, Scotland, Spain, Canada and other nations around the world, this is a measure utilised - some form of rent stabilisation to assist in very tight rental markets.

The second measure under this would be the end of no-grounds evictions identified by Deloitte Partners, no less, as a policy that needs to change to provide greater housing security. With the current situation, no-grounds evictions can be served at the end of a fixed term tenancy and that allows a landlord to jack up the rent and can lead to inadequate servicing of properties, due to the threat of eviction that hangs over any tenant as they approach the end of their lease.

Those two measures, rental price caps and the end of no-cause evictions, could readily be delivered through a review of our Residential Tenancy Act and would not cost the

Government anything in ongoing funding. Then, we have two other measures that would immediately increase the number of homes in the private rental market, without having to build them. The first would be to ensure that local councils have the power to pause the transfer of private rental homes to the short stay accommodation sector; or, for the state Government to put a pause on that for the time being. The Treasurer is regularly asked about this and about whether local governments could be empowered to do this. Why not let them determine whether this is something their local community needs to pause? However, it is not Government policy.

I understand it is available to local councils. The Hobart City Council has been interested in pursuing this for some time but has been given the run-around and the legal 'here, there and everywhere', trying to find a way that they can do this under current arrangements. The state Government could do it immediately through a direction from the minister. It has been five years since we put rules and laws in place around short stay in this state, and collecting data about it. We know there is an impact when properties move from the private rental market into the short stay accommodation market.

We know this, because when that market became unviable during COVID-19, the rent for a number of properties in Hobart immediately dropped by 12 per cent when they moved back into the private rental market. There are two benefits there: the properties that moved back into the private rental market became available for households needing a roof over their heads; and it also put downward pressure on rents, which benefited everybody across the private rental sector. We saw it happen during COVID-19. It could happen again, if we pulled that policy lever but the Government is refusing to do so.

The second measure which would immediately put more supply into the private rental market, and cost the Government nothing - in fact, it could be a source of revenue - would be a vacant house levy, to encourage a shift of those properties that are currently vacant back into the private rental market. Data from TasWater indicates there are 2000 vacant homes across Tasmania, with 563 houses in the LGA areas of Hobart, Launceston and Glenorchy.

Some of those 563 houses are likely to be suitable to be back in the private rental market. A vacant house levy has been successfully applied in Melbourne since 2018, and in Scotland for a number of years. During 2017 to 2021 in Vancouver, Canada, a vacant homes levy resulted in a reduction of 36 per cent in vacant homes. Even the *Mercury* editorial, on 18 February, talked about solving the housing crisis and said this:

It is unacceptable that thousands of homes remain vacant and more and more long-term rental properties are converted to short-stay accommodation. To solve the problem politicians must think outside the square. Empty home levies should be considered ... It is not good enough to point to the future as a solution. Governments at all levels must pull every lever they can to ease the crisis in both the short and long term.

These are levers that are available, and the Government should be pulling them. None of the measures would cost the Government anything; in fact the vacant house levy would be revenue-positive. The only reason to oppose those measures is ideological. You prioritise building the wealth of those who already have multiple properties over providing basic protections and a basic roof over those in our community who are the most vulnerable. It is as

simple as that: prioritising the wealth of property owners over vulnerable Tasmanians who are at risk or experiencing homelessness.

One of the things that I will be interested to explore in Estimates next week will be details around our child safety system - the way it is being dealt with in this Budget and the plans in the years ahead. I note that an additional \$8.3 million has been allocated in the Budget over the next two years to continue to support the Intensive Family and Youth Engagement Service, which is designed to help children remain with their families when it is safe for them to do so. I note \$3 million to support young people leaving care.

The Council suspended from 1.00 p.m. to 2.30 p.m.

[debate resumes]

[2.55 p.m.]

Ms WEBB (Nelson) - Mr President, before the lunchbreak I was speaking about the child safety system and making some remarks, noting a couple of particular funding items in the Budget. I mentioned the \$3 million to support young people leaving care.

A number of years back when I was in the community services sector, we did advocacy work to have what was then called the Home Stretch program, adopted by this Government. To its credit, it was the first in Australia to adopt a Home Stretch program, which was about assisting young people who had been in out-of-home care as they come to the age of 18 and not immediately being left out in the cold then to fend for themselves. This supported them through into their early twenties in various ways. It is good to see some more investment there. I do wonder, and perhaps we will have the opportunity to learn more next week, about the degree to which we are meeting need in that area with the additional announcement.

There was also some money allocated, \$1.3 million, as a permanent top-up for the Child Safety Service, to meet increased demand. I believe that does not kick in until a couple of years away and I imagine there is quite significant demand now on that system and the workers in that system, let alone recruitment challenges they are facing in an ongoing fashion.

It is important to see in the Budget an allocation of \$30 million for immediate responses to the commission of inquiry findings and recommendations due to be handed down in August. I understand this is a placeholder amount allocated, so we are ready to respond as a state to any particularly urgent recommendations that emerge when that report comes down in August. I hope the \$30 million there earmarked is an informed quantum of funding to enable us to do any urgent actions immediately. I imagine the Government, in all good faith, will be putting more money towards that as required according to the recommendations made and the stated commitment to respond to them fully. We will see how that plays out.

Mr President, I will explore in more detail next week in the Estimates process the areas of schools and education. I will not make extensive remarks here. There are some modest investments indicated in the Budget in areas that would be positive. There is money over the next four years for in-class support for teachers' assistants and educational support specialists. The \$36.5 million over four years does not seem to be a great deal of money each year, when you consider the number of schools and classrooms across the state. I would like more detail on how that is going to be divvied up across the entirety of the school system. Perhaps, they will be giving them Harry Potter-style Time-Turners, and they can double their time each day.

There is \$4.6 million in 2023-24, which is then repeated over the forward Estimates to a total of \$19 million towards teacher attraction and retention. Positive, we know that workforce in all areas is really struggling with attracting and retaining professional staff. Again, \$4.6 million a year or thereabouts appears modest, in order to address that task. At least there is a gesture there. There is \$15.4 million over the forward Estimates to increase senior leadership roles in schools and more detail on that will be good to receive through Estimates.

The relatively small amount there of \$1.5 million for universal access to preschool for three-year-olds is a positive area to focus on. It makes all the difference to have a positive beginning of engagement with schools and three-year-olds attending preschool can be a wonderful way to support families with a good, solid educational start for their children.

I would like to understand more about the efforts to improve literacy instruction to support students with disability in our schools and to address educational disengagement by other vulnerable student cohorts, such as those who are in out-of-home care. The funding allocated in this Budget is not even close to being at a strategic or genuine level to now change our dismaying trajectory of educational outcomes over an extended period. We are into the third term of this Government that is overseeing no tangible improvement to Tasmania's educational outcomes across this decade. Every child that we fail in our educational system then faces an uphill battle in achieving the basic markers of a good life, a home, a job, successful relationships and connections with their community. Education is not an area in which we can afford, on a human or an economic level, to tinker around the edges; we need transformative change and I do not see that in this Budget.

One success story to point to though in the educational area to highlight is the child and family centres present in many of our communities for a number of years, or a decade for some of them. I will always welcome investment made in those centres and the expansion of their number in our state. It is very pleasing to see there is continued investment in some of those new facilities coming online. I am particularly pleased to see that one is going to be in Kingston, which is part of the electorate of Nelson. That is going to be a wonderful, positive addition to the Kingston community.

There has been historic underfunding in the community services sector in Tasmania. At the TasCOSS budget briefing, the CEO of a respected community service organisation asked the question of the minister: 'What is the narrative for the sector in this Budget?' That was an excellent question and one the minister was not able to provide a clear answer to. Where is this Budget heading over the next four years and what will the impact be for the community services sector and vulnerable Tasmanians that it supports?

This is something we should be able to readily answer when we look to this Budget, but unfortunately, it looks somewhat dismal. TasCOSS made the point and I quote from their public comments: [TBC]

Just like all other Tasmanians, community services organisations are being smashed by skyrocketing costs.

And yet, instead of indexation being provided to this essential sector, the Government has sidestepped its responsibilities, as TasCOSS then said:

It is incredibly disappointing that the critical value of our industry was not recognised in this Budget. Instead of delivering adequate indexation so that we can cover our costs, the Government announced funding of \$2.1 million in the form of topup funding to give selected community service organisations an effective lift to 4 per cent for one year.

The minister admits this is an inadequate response to funding the community services industry and he is correct. What the Government has delivered for most of the community services sector is a cut in funding. On the minister's admission at the TasCOSS briefing last week that this was an inadequate response and he was personally hoping to provide more, I note there has been media coverage today trying to have a go at making some political hay with that statement from the minister at the briefing. That was unnecessary, uncalled for and unhelpful.

I found the minister's comments at that briefing to be quite refreshing, honest and genuine. We would all understand that in a Cabinet process, a minister is going to be making arguments for the portfolio areas they are responsible for. Then decisions are made which the minister might feel personally sad were not as advantageous to that sector as they might have liked. I think that the sector in that TasCOSS briefing last week would have been quite pleased to hear that their minister was trying hard and advocating for them, even if he had not been able to be as successful as he would have liked. That is just a little aside based on some commentary today. Having said that, the lack of adequate and ongoing funding for the community services sector will result in winding back services. It will result in turning vulnerable, hurting people away. More will then turn to our emergency departments; more will then be seen sleeping rough in tents by our roadsides; more will be plunged further into debt and be pushed towards our criminal justice system.

The Government has failed to provide fair and reasonable funding. It will mean cuts to services; it will mean job losses. It will mean services and even organisations ceasing to operate. This is the consequence of the decisions in this Budget. It concerns me greatly that what we are seeing here in this Budget is a ramping up of the Government taking the community sector for granted. Taking it for granted that the sector will make do with the crumbs from the table, that it will not make a fuss because it relies on government funding to keep operating and it will act as a grateful supplicant. This is entirely unacceptable and I believe it is offensive, when you consider the crucial role being played by this sector in our state right now on a daily basis.

The Government has announced a comprehensive review over the next 12 months of the funding models for the community services sector with an apparent aim to ensure longer term certainty, clear outcomes and adaptable service provision. Given what I see as the blatant disrespect and devaluing of the community services sector in this Budget, I regard the upcoming review of the funding models by this Government as a risk, quite frankly. There is the opportunity for improvement in funding arrangements and a move to recognise the true cost of delivery of services and valuing of those services. The intention to move to five-year contracts is promising and I believe the minister has publicly committed to fast-track that shift as current contracts expire and have it in place by the end of 2024. We also know that the intention under the review of funding models is to move to outcomes funding frameworks to, in the minister's words at the TasCOSS briefing, seek to redefine success.

While that could be a positive shift, it may also portend ominous new expectations and rationalisations for this sector. Quite frankly, I am fearful that the review of the community sector funding models could result in the sector being relegated to an even more marginal position than the esteem this Government currently holds it in. I hope that fear is proven to be misplaced and I believe it should be on the Government to publicly commit that the sector will come out ahead of any such review, rather than being further marginalised.

On another matter related to this sector, where is the funding to address the urgent workforce issues faced by the community services sector? Funding was provided in recent years to develop a workforce plan for this sector but where is the funding to deliver it? Where is the funding to back it up? Maybe the staff in the community services sector should start turning up for work in high-vis vests to attract the attention and the support of this Government?

We see money poured into workforce development and training in the construction sector, in previous years and again in this Budget. Clearly, those in high-vis clothing are valued very highly by this Government and invested in readily, but not the equally important workforce in the social services area, who are faced with massively increasing demand, uncertain funding, skyrocketing inflation and next to no support or investment from this Government.

When I am looking at the community services sector in this Budget, I cannot help but look at other blatant priorities presented in the same pages. On the one hand, I see the whole community sector in urgent need, getting crumbs off the table, instead of getting anything remotely like appropriate sector-wide indexation - \$2.1 million towards indexation for only some organisations. On the other hand, I see corporate welfare in this Budget, largesse provided to successful, well-connected corporate businesses, provided for no discernible urgent need at all.

For example, I see the \$5 million provided to Elphinstone. It is a successful for-profit business owned, I believe, by a billionaire. I have no doubt that, as the Leader mentioned in her contribution, the Elphinstones are lovely people and generous philanthropists. However, that is hardly a basis on which to decide to gift their business public money.

Mrs Hiscutt - Mr President, by way of personal explanation, that was my comment, not a Government comment.

Ms WEBB - That is fine.

Mrs Hiscutt - Thank you. I want that noted.

Ms WEBB - Regardless, my point is that I have no doubt it is true, but it is not a basis on which to decide to gift their business public money.

Mrs Hiscutt - Mr President, by way of personal explanation, you have said it again, it is not the Government making that decision based on my comments on the Elphinstones.

Ms WEBB - I am not making that comment.

Mrs Hiscutt - You said it is 'no basis on which'.

Ms WEBB - May I continue with my contribution? I am standing by the statement I have made there; you have made yours. I will continue. That \$5 million could have tripled the reach of the indexation provided to the community sector organisations; that \$5 million could have massively boosted the capacity of the emergency food provision services that I have talked about earlier that are crying out and being swamped by demand. Over the next few years, that \$5 million could have made a tangible difference.

Priorities is what budgets are about and the priorities of this Government have been made quite clear. I am not going to go into too much detail on the area of Justice and Corrections in this Budget. I will have an opportunity to explore those in detail in Estimates next week and I will be glad to interrogate some of the key areas there. I will note now that I will be interested to understand more about the allocations for the new youth justice centres that will replace Ashley Youth Detention Centre and whether we will be in a position to meet the commitments of a closure of the Ashley youth detention facility. Similarly, no doubt the funding for the new northern prison will be an area of focus.

Moving on, I wonder, where is climate change in this Budget? Where was it in the Budget speech? The word 'climate' was in a subheading if you were reading the Budget speech but then nothing connected to climate was discussed under that heading, nor anywhere else, I believe, in the speech. It is quite astonishing to me when just last year we passed significant amendments to a critical piece of legislation, our climate change act.

In that act there are urgent responsibilities to progress certain actions from this year onwards. However, other than the scattered and ad hoc mention of climate such as the reference to the bushfire management capacity as having climate implications, in budget paper 2, volume 1, page 147, the main mention of climate change, forward planning and implementation is in a footnote. It is footnote 13 in budget paper 2, volume 1, p.259

The footnote reads:

The variation in Climate Change over the Forward Estimates reflects the timing of funding provided for existing Budget initiatives, including the Climate Change Action Plan and the Emission Reduction Loan Scheme.

This refers to table 10.2, which details investment in dedicated climate change action which, just to remind ourselves, is internationally recognised as the greatest policy challenge facing us here and now. That funding in the Budget will peak at approximately \$8.5 million in the 2024-25 financial year and then will decrease to \$2.7 million over the remaining forward Estimates. Clearly, we will have solved the challenge of climate change and actioned all of our responsibilities perhaps by 2026-27. I doubt that and find that a disturbing drop-off in funding allocated.

As we know the current draft Climate Change Action Plan was released in March this year with the next 2023-25 Climate Action Plan scheduled to be released later in the year. Maybe a financial framework will be released with that next climate action plan. Given, as the minister states in his foreword in the current draft plan, less than seven years remain to take the necessary actions to achieve our legislated 2030 emissions target, and given that frank assessment by the minister, I would have thought we would be expecting to see funding ring-fenced via the forward Estimates instead of dropping off so markedly from such a low

baseline in the first place, considering the magnitude of the task before us as a whole community.

As a reminder, given the amendments to the Climate Change (State Action) Act 2008 passed in November last year which requires that the Government prepare a climate change action plan within one year and then at least every five years; and requires that it works with industry and business to develop sector-based emissions reduction and resilience plans within two years to be updated at least every five years. the first emissions reductions and resilience plan for the transport sector is to be developed within that first 12 months that we are in.

Another one was to prepare a statewide climate change risk assessment, which considers risks associated with energy transition, including social and economic impacts. Initial risk assessments are to be prepared within two years and updated every five years.

Finally, another requirement is to prepare and publish an annual greenhouse gas emissions report and an annual climate change activities statement. It is hard to fathom how the allocations across the years from here on out, \$7 million the first year, \$8.5 million and then dropping down to that \$2 million mark across the forward Estimates, detailed there in table 10.2, is going to deliver these legislated statutory requirements. I will be looking at that in more detail next week in the Estimates process.

If we fail to seize this opportunity, we know there is a rapidly closing window to meet our climate change challenge head on and we risk locking ourselves into ongoing long-term expensive climate crisis reactions, rather than proactive plans.

Regarding environment, there is \$400 000 allocated this financial year coming for the Tasmanian Planning Commission to complete a State of the Environment Report by June 2024. Remember, we have missed two of the statutory required iterations since the last 2009 report, which cost \$900 000 to produce. The Tasmanian Planning Commission advised the Government an updated report will cost \$1 million. What do you think we can expect, Mr President, from our \$400 000? Do you think less than half a report? Especially considering the Planning minister has said publicly the Tasmanian Planning Commission is not the right body for the job. Given that this Government has already missed two statutory requirements to produce the report, this what looks like paltry funding may be adding insult to injury. We did find out more through documents released under RTI on 28 July 2022, through TPC minute to the Minister for Planning, which discussed the opportunity to do an updated State of the Environment Report. It said this:

The TPC cannot produce the State of the Environment Report because it cannot finance a production of the report. The total cost of producing the 2009 State of the Environment Report was in excess of \$1 million over five years. With CPI this figure would now be in excess of \$1.25 million. This would amount to additional \$250 000 per year for the Budget when the Commission is also seeking additional funding through assessment of draft local provision schedules.

The TPC financial resources are whole committed to its core functions of assessing and reporting on statutory planning amendments. The situation is compounded by the TPC's current role of delivering the Government's planning reforms.

No doubt there will be some more details extracted in Estimates on how we are to expect the TPC to undertake its ongoing work and feed into producing a State of the Environment Report and how exactly that \$400 000 allocated will be utilised.

I do note in budget paper 1, on page 18, under the heading 'Revenue risks' and a subheading 'State Taxation', it says this:

In addition, reductions to taxation rates and restrictions to the revenue base for particular taxation lines, in the absence of new sources of revenue, will impact on Tasmania's capacity to grow own source revenue in the future.

What could they be talking about here?

One thing that springs to my mind is pokies and poker machine taxation and that as a revenue source for our state. Let us remember the impact on state revenue that will come into play this year with the poker machine licensing reforms from 1 July. From this year onwards, there will be millions of dollars of revenue to the state lost that should have been generated because of a gift through heavily and unnecessarily discounted tax rates provided to casinos, being applied to their poker machines in casinos and the operation of keno in casinos. It is a shame on this place that we have passed legislation that allows such blatant gift-giving - corporate welfare, essentially - and has denied a line of revenue to our state that should have been a positive addition to what we know. In fact, what budget paper 1 says is, we need to be paying attention to increasing our own revenue as a state. These blatant gifts of money to political donors will now deprive our state of revenue year after year, at the same time we are expecting our public service, nurses, teachers, police, justice and corrections workers and environmental managers to take a cut in their departments, and throw more weight onto their shoulders as they struggle to support our community. Priorities in this Budget are stark.

One matter I did look for in the Budget, given it was an announcement in the Premier's Address earlier in the year, was evidence of the establishment of a state demographer. I searched all three budget papers, the Budget speech, the overview booklet, looking for mention and funding details of the state demographer mentioned by the Premier in the Premier's Address. I did not find anything that relates to it; maybe I have missed it somewhere, that it is wrapped up in a line item and not clearly identified or specified. I sought to see how we would go about establishing this role of state demographer, which is a quite positive idea that has a lot of potential. I hope it was not just a thought bubble and we would have seen it first in the reality of the Budget, but perhaps that will come to light through Estimates. It is very welcome to have a second iteration of the Gender Budget Snapshot with the Budget. It is very positive for our state we are moving in the direction of having a process where we consider gender in relation to budgeting and the priorities expressed in the budget.

This year's iteration with more detail is an improvement on last year's effort and that is positive. It would have been pleasing to have some greater explanation about what is presented as analysis here, the fact there were some measures from the Budget pulled out to then be assessed against some measures of gender equality such as economic security, leadership and participation, safety and health and wellbeing aligning with our Women's Strategy, is potentially a good step forward in an analysis. However, the fact they have been given little green circles or little yellow circles or little grey circles to indicate how well they are performing has not been explained anywhere and it would have been good to understand how that analysis was done and really understand the particular ways these assessments were arrived

at. This is a step on the way, but what we are looking ahead to is broader analysis that is needed to more accurately assess the impact of budget and other decisions when it comes to gender. As was pointed out by the member for Mersey in his contribution, that does not just mean women and girls but gender broadly, so we understand how different genders are impacted by policy and budget decisions.

Women's Health Tasmania noted:

It is called a Tasmanian gender budget snapshot, not an assessment. That is probably because the Government acknowledges that it is still working on how to do the assessments, after all a gender impact assessment of the state budget will require the Government to analyse its policy development and funding initiatives in a new way, to really understand the way they impact on people of different genders differently. That has huge and exciting potential to challenge the way that we think about the priorities for the expenditure of public money.

Further in that statement was this:

The problem is that so much of our discussion of state budget focuses on the small amount of new money given to new projects, when so much of our public money is already committed to being spent on things we know are important, i.e. hospitals, schools, etc. Perhaps, a budget impact assessment has the most power when it looks at a history of expenditure, for example, if we were to look at Government investment in key social policy areas over the last ten years, we would get an idea of who in the community those initiatives benefited and who missed out. It may tell us what we think we know or it may overturn our assumptions about how large amounts of public money are spent. It might be another lens to use to help to make decisions about large-scale infrastructure expenditure, for example. Perhaps, this kind of analysis will be the next iteration of the Budget impact assessment. A baby born being from a very long labour.

I think that was a thoughtful reflection there. It is helpful for us to be reminded about what we might be looking ahead and working towards so that we can see, as we step forward in the process, where we are making progress. I did think while it was interesting to see the initiatives pulled out for some apparent analysis in this snapshot, I would have liked to understand how the analysis was applied, as I mentioned before.

To be honest, I would have found it particularly fascinating - it may well have not been possible at this point in time, and I acknowledge that, but just as a thought experiment - to take what I would have thought were two of the key pillars of this Budget and look at them in terms of a gender analysis. Those two key pillars I would have thought were the infrastructure projects that we invest in and the infrastructure spend as a total on the one hand, and on the other hand, the efficiency dividend that has been proposed as a savings measure.

A gender impact assessment of those two areas of this Budget would have been very informative. I think there are gender connotations for both of those key areas of this Budget and they are fairly stark when you think about infrastructure spending and the workforce that is usually the predominant one in that area. Despite very laudable efforts that we are currently

engaged in to have more women in the construction workforce, it still is a largely male-gendered workforce. A lot of investment is needed in that space. Even if we think about the benefits that flow on, there might be an interesting gender analysis that flows from the infrastructure projects that we are choosing.

On the other hand, it would have been fascinating to see a gender impact assessment of the proposed efficiency dividend as a savings measure and who and how that impacts our community. When I think about the public sector, which has that applied to it, I think about the two largest workforces there, being the health workforce and the education workforce and the very gendered status of those two workforces. The likely implications, whether it is job losses, greater workload, that sort of thing, that will inevitably flow from an efficiency dividend and the cuts that come with it into those spaces, is an interesting gender analysis, too, of the immediate impact and then the flow-through into the community.

One day, we will be at a point where we are making those large-scale analyses of efforts in the budget and the budget as a whole. I look forward to that. I join Women's Health Tasmania in their statement. They acknowledge the Minister for Women, Jo Palmer, here in our Chamber and her genuine commitment to see this work progress and continue to grow and develop. I, too, would love to hear about how that might be stepping out into the future. Sometimes it is helpful to know where we are on our path and what the next steps might be because that is a way that we can contextualise and moderate the way we are thinking about where we are now. I would put that out there as an invitation to further communication about how things are being taken forward.

We also know that we have other states we can look to, which are further along this path. We can draw on experiences and I know that there are many in the community, groups like Women's Health Tasmania and other key stakeholders as well from areas to do with men's issues and investments made in men's areas. I know people in this place, including myself, who would really love to continue to be involved, informed and are very happy to contribute to helping this progress even further into the next iteration and the one after that.

Mr President, before concluding, you will not be surprised to hear that I want to touch on the value of a Tasmanian human rights act and what that could bring to our consideration of the state Budget, from its development and formation, through to our analysis and scrutiny.

I note that the Australian Human Rights Commission has published a position paper in recent times, titled Free and Equal: A Human Rights Act for Australia. It is focused at a national level but it is pertinent to sub-national jurisdictions when they contemplate the value of a human rights act. In that paper, the Australian Human Rights Commission president Emeritus Professor Rosalind Croucher AM, states this:

The beauty of a Human Rights Act and other measures that frontload rights-mindedness is that they are expressed in the positive and they are embedded in decision-making and ahead of any dispute.

A Human Rights Act names rights, it provides an obligation to consider them and a process by which to do it, together supporting a cultural shift towards rights-mindedness becoming part of the national psyche, not just an afterthought. The purpose of such an act is to change the culture of decision-making and embed transparent human rights-based decisions as part of public

culture. The outcome needs to be that laws, policies and decisions are made through a human rights lens and it is the upstream aspect that is so crucial to change.

This is a very clear description of the valuable framing that would be provided by a human rights act in our state. Even as we are still on the pathway to a human rights act we can begin to adopt and promote the positive benefit of human rights framing. That Australian Human Rights Commission Free and Equal position paper calls for policymakers to promote a human rights language throughout governance processes and policy development with the aim of building a human rights culture and ultimately moving us towards a human rights act.

We know that words matter; words build culture. This AHRC paper encourages us to begin using the language of human rights to build culture and a framework of understanding about human rights as we inevitably move towards the act, hopefully, for our state and our nation. The four key principles to human rights presented in that Free and Equal paper are these: democratic, preventative, protective and effective.

To be democratic calls for parliamentary sovereignty, accountability for upholding the rule of law and participation to ensure the voices of all are heard in debate. To be preventative means to be proactive. To be protective means to ensure there are safeguards against contraventions of rights. To be effective means ensuring best practice decision-making and ensuring equality of access to effective interventions.

That Free and Equal paper provides a language. It provides us with the words to embed human rights in law and public administration and decision-making involving policy, including budgets. They are practical tools in policy analysis that have been shown to be effective in rights-based countries and also here in Australia in Victoria, Queensland and the ACT, which all have human rights acts or charters.

I note that our local OPCAT advocates also emphasise the concepts of proportionality and progressive implementation. Even if we do not yet have a human rights act we can behave as if we do and, at the least, seek to give effect to those key principles through appropriate language ensuring that prevention of contravention of rights through strong scrutiny mechanisms, through rights-based policy consideration and development and through adopting rights-based principles in our governance.

To conclude, let me briefly reiterate that budgets are about values and priorities not just numbers and dollars. Budgets should present a strategic future plan. I fear this Budget is clearly based on values that do not prioritise the most vulnerable Tasmanians, which I believe is an abject failure of responsible leadership at this time of such urgent need. This Budget fails to present a credible and complete future plan able to deliver transformative progress for our state on the most significant challenges our community faces.

I note the Budget but I do so with some significant sadness and disappointment.