

*Standing Committee on Estimates and Financial Operations — Eighty-sixth Report —  
Consideration of the 2020–21 annual reports — Motion*

Resumed from 23 November 2022 on the following motion moved by Hon Peter Collier —

That the report be noted.

**Hon JACKIE JARVIS:** Deputy Chair, I have no further comments to add, so I will yield my time.

**Hon NICK GOIRAN:** We are considering this report a couple of hours earlier than we usually would on a Wednesday afternoon. Ordinarily on the business program, we would be diving into motions on notice. The government had indicated that we would deal with the Indigenous Voice to Parliament this afternoon, but that will no longer be happening. For my part, that is unfortunate, because I was quite looking forward to having that debate. Instead, we are now considering committee reports, and in this case, the eighty-sixth report of the Standing Committee on Estimates and Financial Operations, *Consideration of the 2020–21 annual reports*.

This report might seem rather routine, but it is anything but, particularly when members consider the ongoing secrecy of the now Cook Labor government, which is continuing the legacy of the McGowan Labor government, particularly with regard to health advice. I draw to the attention of members that pursuant to this report, on 23 March last year, there was a public hearing with the Department of Health and the North Metropolitan Health Service. During that session a number of topics were tackled by the standing committee. Two of them included the Chief Health Officer's advice about public health state of emergency declarations and state of emergency declarations. It did not just stop there. A number of others areas were tackled, including the so-called need for the continuation of SafeWA and ServiceWA check-ins at public indoor venues; the resources that were being provided to COVID-19 positive cases to enable them to conduct their own contact tracing; the expected peak of the COVID-19 Omicron outbreak and the associated level of public health restrictions; WA Health's access to G2G data during and since the reporting period; and adverse effects of COVID-19 vaccines, amongst other things. All these matters were tackled during the committee's consideration during its public hearing with the Department of Health and the North Metropolitan Health Service.

More than a year later we now know that the legacy government continues to adhere to a gold standard of secrecy rather than a gold standard of transparency. I have repeatedly asked for this information to be provided, yet the government has refused. A couple of recent examples that will interest members include a response provided by Hon Amber-Jade Sanderson, in her capacity as Minister for Health, to Hon Peter Foster, in his capacity as the Chair of the Standing Committee on Environment and Public Affairs. The committee was looking into a petition that had been tabled by me and signed by thousands of Western Australians calling for the health advice and modelling that the government had relied upon during the coronavirus era to be provided to Parliament, and in particular to the standing committee, but instead, having been asked this information by the standing committee, the honourable minister, on 17 October last year, responded —

The State Government's management of the COVID-19 global pandemic continues to be world class. It is disappointing to receive a petition from members of the community ...

Can you imagine, deputy chair, that people in Western Australia might reasonably have been interested to see or read the advice? Yet, the Minister for Health says that it is disappointing that members of the community would seek this information, such is the contempt of the Minister for Health for the people of Western Australia. That was on 17 October last year.

A very significant event has occurred since then, and that is the change in who is the Premier of Western Australia. When we were last sitting it was Hon Mark McGowan, the member for Rockingham. He has since retired and the member for Kwinana, Hon Roger Cook, is now the Premier of Western Australia. That change provides an opportunity for a change in political culture from the secrecy we had seen under Premier McGowan to hopefully something more transparent and accountable under Premier Cook. However, we now know that it appears this will not happen and that Premier Cook wants to continue the legacy of secrecy that he inherited from his predecessor. Question time yesterday demonstrates this point perfectly. Yesterday, I asked the Premier about this health advice and modelling. Members will recall that Premier McGowan instructed three people in Western Australia to undertake a review of the government's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, its management and response. He entrusted three Western Australians to undertake this review. I had asked Mr McGowan whether he would provide that health advice and modelling to the independent reviewers. When I asked that earlier this year, Mr McGowan's "helpful response" was to say that any requests for information from the independent reviewers will be considered. In other words, instead of proactively providing this information to the reviewers, which we would think would be at the heart of the review, he said he will provide this information only if requested, such was his contemptuous attitude in February this year. In May, I asked further questions on this matter and Mr McGowan indicated that a final report is expected to be provided to cabinet in mid-2023. Yesterday, I wanted to see whether Premier Cook

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would take a different, more transparent and accountable attitude than his predecessor, and regretfully the answer is no in the strongest possible terms. Yesterday, I asked him —

Have the reviewers requested all the health advice and modelling?

An accountable answer to that question, which a responsible government would respond with, would be either a yes or a no, because either the reviewers have requested all the health advice and modelling or they have not. Of course, in the typical evasive fashion that we have become accustomed to, there was no such response. I asked whether any of the health advice and modelling had been provided to the independent reviewers, and again, there was a constructive failure to answer. Thirdly, I asked whether the Premier will table a list of what has been provided to the reviewers and, again, there was a constructive refusal to answer. Instead of answering any of those three questions, what we had yesterday was this response, which could not possibly be fairly described as an answer. It was as follows —

The independent panel has been provided with access to any and all government information that it has requested to inform its review.

That is terrific. Does that include the health advice and modelling that thousands of Western Australians have been asked be provided publicly? Does it? Yes or no? We do not know because again there was this evasive answer. The response goes on to say —

Material relied upon by the independent panel to inform its findings and recommendations will be outlined in the final report.

Once again, it is tremendous to be told that obvious statement of fact. It goes without saying that a report tabled by these reviewers will include material that they have relied upon. The question Western Australians want to know is will that include the health advice and modelling that the government said underpinned all its decisions? Will it? Has it been provided to the independent reviewers or not? It is all well and good to say that there will be a report provided to cabinet in mid-2023—that is tremendous. Will it include the fact that the health advice and modelling has been provided to them or not? That will fundamentally tell us to what extent this independent review can be properly relied upon by Western Australians, or whether it is a sham. That is what we would like to know. I call upon the government to provide a fulsome answer to these questions.

**Hon KLARA ANDRIC:** I welcome the opportunity also speak on the eighty-sixth report of the Standing Committee on Estimates and Financial Operations, titled *Consideration of the 2020–21 annual reports*. I do not want to get into what Hon Nick Goiran was alluding to, but I will say that I am sure most Western Australians in this state, and certainly many who members on this side of the chamber have spoken to, would agree that the priority of the government was to save lives. How well the state government responded to and dealt with COVID-19 cannot be questioned. I would say quite confidently that that, in fact, was the main priority for Western Australians, as opposed to the modelling system. Therefore, to begin with, I would like to put that into some form of perspective.

Today I have the opportunity to speak on the eighty-sixth report of the Standing Committee on Estimates and Financial Operations, titled *Consideration of the 2020–21 annual reports*. This report was tabled in June 2022 by Hon Peter Collier, and is a consideration of the annual reports for that period. The executive summary states —

This report concludes the Legislative Council Standing Committee on Estimates and Financial Operations' (Committee) consideration of the 2020–21 annual reports.

As outlined in the report —

The Committee met with five agencies, and corresponded with one other.

Annual reports complete the yearly budget cycle, which begins with the appropriation bills and budget papers. Although the budget papers show what an agency intends to achieve for that particular year—that being in both financial and non-financial grounds—annual reports provide an insight into how the agency performed in the given year. During the inquiry this committee investigated the following issues listed under paragraph 3 of the executive summary. It states —

In the course of this inquiry, the Committee:

- examined the overall expected and actual spending from the Consolidated Account
- reviewed occasions where selected agencies received additional appropriations
- reviewed actual performance against key performance indicators for selected agencies
- highlighted occasions where the Auditor General qualified her audit opinions of agencies and raised matters of significance

- further examined whether the Department of Education had sought the Treasurer's prior approval to overdraw the Student Residential Colleges Fund.

As mentioned in the report, through the inquiry, the committee made four findings, which were followed up with three recommendations. I am not sure whether members have had the opportunity to grab a copy, but there is a government response to all the recommendations. The government response supports recommendation 1 and states —

The Department of Treasury will write to accountable authorities subject to the *Financial Management Act 2006* (FMA) reminding them of their obligations under the FMA, including that they obtain the Treasurer's prior approval under section 19 of the FMA should they anticipate an agency special purpose account becoming overdrawn at any time, including for timing differences between receipts and payments.

Treasury hosts the chief finance officers' (CFOs) forum twice yearly and will also bring this to the attention of CFOs at the November 2022 Forum.

Recommendation 2, which once again I note to members, is found in the report, is also supported by the government. I will not read out that recommendation as I am sure members can do that themselves. The third and final recommendation in the eighty-sixth report is noted by the government and the response is also located in the document.

As outlined in the report, the committee examined a number of agencies in detail during the reporting period. Some of those agencies include the Department of Education, the Department of Health, the Department of Planning, Lands and Heritage, the North Metropolitan Health Service, the Office of the Auditor General and the State Coroner's office. These agencies reported against eight desired outcomes, 18 services and 72 key effectiveness indicators. I refer to one of the agencies listed in the report on page 4, table 2, "Supplementary appropriations, 2020–21", items 54 and 123. These items refer to WA Health and primarily relate to COVID-19 expenditure. As stated in the report, item 54 received funding of \$377.6 million and its expenditure included, but was not limited to, things such as hotel quarantine and repatriation measures, the heightened consumption of personal protective equipment, operations and additional pathology costs of the State Health Incident Coordination Centre and public health emergency coordination centre. Item 123 received funding of \$11.8 million and was primarily used for the purchasing of things such as medical equipment, the logistical costs relating to warehousing and ongoing preventive and preparedness activities including the development of the SafeWA and VaccinateWA applications.

The second agency that is listed in table 2 is the Department of Education. As noted in the report, item 60 received an amount of \$48.2 million. Expenditure included, but was not limited to, spending associated with COVID-19 school cleaning, the 2020–21 impact of revisions to school enrolments, the delivery of election commitments and an update to the low interest loan scheme. Item 61 received an amount of \$10.8 million, which was dedicated to reflecting per capita grants to non-government schools due to an unexpected increase in student enrolment numbers. I was pleased to see the amount of expenditure that went into items 54, 123 and 60, which reflected the McGowan government's tactical response to the COVID-19 pandemic and which kept our state's infection rates the lowest in our country. I reiterate that many Western Australians were, and continue to be, very grateful for that, because I am sure that many of them have not forgotten what many of the other states around our country, let alone the world, went through during that time.

In conclusion, the 2020–21 annual reports provides the reader with an accurate assessment of how government agencies performed against both financial and non-financial criteria. As someone who comments on many reports, from across the committees, I find this information very helpful because it gives me a bit of an insight into not only what the committees do, but also what government and agencies do across our state. I find these reports, particularly this eighty-sixth report that I have spoken briefly about today, very helpful in getting a better understanding of what committees do and the scrutiny of government and finances.

**Hon PIERRE YANG:** Thank you, Deputy Chair, for the opportunity to say a few words on the eighty-sixth report of the Standing Committee on Estimates and Financial Operations, titled *Consideration of the 2020–21 annual reports*. This was a good piece of work done by the committee, which is chaired by Hon Peter Collier. I was very much looking forward to making a contribution concerning this report.

One aspect of this report that I will look at is centred around paragraph 2.4. In 2020–21, the state was going through the pandemic; it started in early 2020. During that period, Western Australia became the envy of the world for the way it managed coronavirus and community spread of the disease. I take members back to that year when other Australian states went into prolonged periods of lockdown. Victoria and New South Wales both went through that, as opposed to Western Australia, which was able to keep the virus out of the state. When we had a case or two of community transmission we went for a sharp and effective response. It was a decisive decision by the government under the leadership of the Premier, Hon Mark McGowan, and the Deputy Premier, now Premier, Hon Roger Cook. We were able to contain it really quickly and nip it in the bud, and get on with things. That is reflected in the budget position of the state.

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That should not be forgotten; it should be talked about. Nothing in government or the community is done in a silo without having an effect on other areas. One makes a decision and there are consequences. The state government made decisions, and there were also consequences. Fortunately, with great leaders and excellent advice from the public service, Western Australia was able to navigate through that treacherous and dangerous situation and it emerged much stronger at the other end.

Paragraph 2.1 of the committee's report correctly points out that the 2020–21 budget was structured around four government goals —

- strong communities: safe communities and supported families
- sustainable finances: responsible financial management and better service delivery
- future jobs and skills: grow and diversify the economy, create jobs and support skills development.
- better places: a quality environment with liveable and affordable communities and vibrant regions.

As we consider today's situation, I argue that the McGowan government, now Cook government, has achieved those four goals. That is an excellent situation for the state to be in. As paragraph 2.2 states, in that financial year the state government sought Parliament's approval to spend \$27.3 billion. The government advised that a further \$2.9 billion would be spent under the authority of other statutes.

Paragraph 2.3 captures something really significant, and I quote —

The Government spent \$30.2 billion from the Consolidated Account in 2020–21, only \$13 million more than expected at the time of the 2020–21 Budget. Table 1 sets out the 2020–21 Budget estimate against actual spending, with the 2019–20 result shown for comparative purposes.

Paragraph 2.4 refers to the areas in which savings were made.

Paragraph 2.3 is significant because \$13 million is a huge amount for any individual. Let us face it, I do not think too many people here would have \$13 million. It is an astronomical amount for an individual to have, yet it is a relatively small number in a large state such as Western Australia in the whole budget process. The government should be acknowledged for that achievement. It demonstrates the gold standard of fiscal discipline of the McGowan government and now the Cook government, which continues that legacy and continues that important fiscal responsibility.

**Hon Dr Steve Thomas:** It's not Thursday, you know.

**Hon Martin Aldridge:** Who did you vote for?

**Hon PIERRE YANG:** I am time limited so I am not going to take any interjections.

**Hon Martin Aldridge:** Tell us: who did you vote for?

**Hon PIERRE YANG:** The members on the other side are not making much sense. I will continue my remarks. I want to talk about fiscal discipline. It is important for any government or enterprise, or any individual, to budget and to not spend beyond their means. The Liberal–National government between 2008 and 2017 failed miserably to do that. Members opposite have smiles on their faces and they may laugh, but the thing is that there is a real human cost. I talked about there being consequences of any decisions we make. There are consequences of decisions the government makes. There were real human costs from the decisions made by the Liberal–National government during its eight long years in office—decisions such as acquiring plastic cows and singing toilets! There was no fiscal discipline. Thanks to the fiscal discipline and financial responsibility demonstrated by the McGowan government and now the Cook government, Western Australia is in a much better state.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR (Hon Dr Sally Talbot):** I give the call to Hon Kyle McGinn. Member, you had sought the call. You may have forgotten, but you did seek the call.

**Hon KYLE MCGINN:** Thank you, deputy chair; my apologies for that.

**Hon Nick Goiran:** Just don't talk about world elder abuse.

**Hon KYLE MCGINN:** It would be a shame to highlight world elder abuse the day before World Elder Abuse Awareness Day, would it not? It would be an absolute shame! It is a shame that someone cannot just hold his tongue while listening to an important statement as it is read out in the chamber. It is absolutely disgraceful that he would be like that. But we have come to expect that from members opposite. It is no surprise. Obviously they cannot help themselves, or their party.

I stand today to talk on the eighty-sixth report of the Standing Committee on Estimates and Financial Operations. It is good to get up and talk on this report. It has gone for a while and I can see we are nearly at the back end. Obviously, members have well and truly gone through this report and spoken in length across this. I appreciate that being in the chamber —

**Hon Nick Goiran** interjected.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR (Hon Dr Sally Talbot):** Can I draw the member's attention to the fact that Hon Kyle McGinn does not need any help.

**Hon KYLE McGINN:** Thank you, deputy chair. I appreciate those strong words that I do not need any help, because I do not.

One of the things I have enjoyed watching and learning about since coming in in 2017 is the process of estimates. It has been an interesting thing to be a part of, not coming from the public sector or working within government or local government, but just being a cook on a ship and then being given the budget papers in 2017—a big stack chucked on your desk—which I thought, before receiving the budget papers, was going to be easy to understand and find where my region is benefiting the most. I really had to delve in and understand how it is broken down. I am glad to say that after six years it is starting to get a bit easier. I have to say I am very appreciative of the USB. It was good to have electronic access to further scrutineer. I was very pleased, not just with the 2020 and 2021 budgets that were put forward by this government, but that the whole Mining and Pastoral electorate has benefited from those budgets. As the member previous to me stated, I am very proud of the budgets delivered under the McGowan and now Cook government. It is refreshing to see budgets that spend effectively in the regions—absolutely they do—and people out in the electorate are very happy about that.

I went into the report and specifically looked at the agencies that the committee looked at in detail. I noticed that on page 3 of the report the committee examined the following agencies in great detail: the Department of Education; Health; Planning, Lands and Heritage; the North Metropolitan Health Service; the Office of the Auditor General; and the Office of the State Coroner. In 2020–21, when the committee embarked on this process, the agencies collectively received \$11.1 billion in appropriations from the consolidated account and reported against eight desired outcomes, 18 services and 72 key effectiveness indicators.

I went into the summary of the agency hearings in the back of the report, which was quite handy. I found it useful to get a broader understanding. I have found from working on committees in the past, definitely not this committee—I think “numbers” is not my game whatsoever—that it can be very hard for someone who is not a part of that process to understand what is taking place when there are so many hearings and the committee is investigating such a broad issue. Even though there is a report, it does not necessarily give all the ins and outs of the hearings. I found appendix 2 and the summary of the agency hearings quite useful and I think that will help members of this place and others who want to get an understanding of how the committee operated and what they were desiring to achieve.

I will touch on what that summary holds. On 16 February, the Office of the Auditor General was in a hearing and the ministerial notices to the Auditor General, the non-provision of information and the process for following up recommendations made to the Auditor General were looked at. The Department of Education, information security, management letters and risk-based regulations were overdrawn. I am not sure whether the report goes into much detail on how long that hearing was. I think there are members of the committee in here who may be able to assist me with how long they scrutinised the Auditor General.

**Hon Nick Goiran:** Off the top of my head, I would say it would have been around 60 to 90 minutes.

**Hon KYLE McGINN:** Was it one hearing?

**Hon Nick Goiran:** It would have been one hearing, 16 February.

**Hon KYLE McGINN:** Yes, sorry; it does specify 16 February.

**Hon Nick Goiran:** I thought I might be accused of assisting.

**Hon KYLE McGINN:** When I asked for the help, I am glad that the member provided it! As part of that committee, I know the member would be across pretty much everything in this report, and it does not surprise me that he can say that off the cuff.

The Department of Planning, Lands and Heritage is such a huge area to look into. I know that from my electorate alone, looking at the land side of things over the last six years and seeing how much land there is and the process for people who want to get access to or buy the land. Heritage is a massive area that I think is no easy feat to get our heads around, but it does seem as though the committee scrutinised this area quite heavily. There were a lot of questions. I could see that there was discussion around pastoral lands reform, which I think would have been very interesting. It would have been particularly interesting if there had been a bit more detail on what was said on pastoral lands reform, but I will move on.

I refer to the development of a new, dedicated Vietnamese cultural centre in Girrawheen. Again, lots of boxes were ticked with the planning, lands and heritage involved in that. The key changes to the Heritage Act 2018 is another very interesting subject. Heritage around WA is something that people notice when they travel in regional WA, like other members of the Mining and Pastoral Region do. I think everyone should do themselves a favour and

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drive through Cue, for example, and look at the heritage that lies out in that area. One of my favourite buildings, working with the local government and trying our best with the local mining company, is the old Gwalia Hotel out near Leonora.

**Hon Neil Thomson:** I was out there the other day.

**Hon KYLE MCGINN:** So was I. We went out and had a look at that, as well. I know the outgoing Shire of Leonora CEO, Jim Epis, is passionate about that building. The heritage of the building is really interesting. Members who have been to Gwalia would understand that the owners of that building have tried their best to show what it is like when a mining company is working and operating somewhere and then just ups and leaves. Visitors walk into little dens in which there is just an old spring bed. The heritage has been protected —

**Hon Neil Thomson:** I recommend people stay there. They should stay there.

**Hon KYLE MCGINN:** Hoover House is just up the road, which is fantastic. They spent a lot of money getting that up and running. People can stay in Hoover House, but I suggest they do not go alone, because I slept there at night and it is a little bit interesting. I am not going to say that I believe in spirits or anything; I am not going to say that Hoover is haunting around! But it is sitting on the edge of an operational mine site, so it is quite an experience. I give a shout-out to the Gwalia set-up, which gets thousands of tourists through that heritage precinct. Thank you, members. I enjoyed talking on the report.

**HON NEIL THOMSON:** I want to raise a couple of points. It is always good to come back to these reports because it reminds us of the kind of discussions we had at the time and how things unfold over time.

I want to start off on page 17 of the report and raise a couple of issues on the divestment of land by the Aboriginal Lands Trust under the Aboriginal Affairs Planning Authority Act to appropriate Aboriginal organisations. I think last week—it all blurs into a seamless time line—I did a large trip around the Kimberley and through the goldfields. I met with people all the way through, particularly those in remote communities. There was a particular issue that I was requested to bring to this place. I hope that the office of the Minister for Lands is watching. Many members know Patrick Green, a Bunuba man. He specifically asked me to raise this matter and his name. I suppose he had this point to raise because it was a point of frustration and there has been little progress.

For the record, I have to declare that when I was a consultant I did some pro bono work for Patrick on this request, so I do know a little bit about it. It goes back about five years. This request was for a lease on a reserve just near the Fitzroy township on what is called Plum Plain. I cannot exactly recall the name of the reserve. An application was made, and I understand that it was supported by the Bunuba prescribed body corporate and put through to the department. It is about five years old and, so far, there has been no progress on this. That was the theme I got. It was for a living area and also for a potential fodder production area. I think this is the sort of thing that we should be focusing on. I am sure that members opposite would agree that we should be making sure that whenever possible, there is an opportunity for economic development in the Aboriginal Lands Trust. If a person of Aboriginal descent, particularly one with the support of the native title holders, wants to proceed with some sort of homeownership development to develop their own living space and opportunities, we should be doing everything we can to allow that. Unfortunately, we have amazing red tape that gets us bogged down.

We can say that the legislation is a problem, and I will look at that bill when it comes through, because there is another aspect to it. I will indeed be looking very closely when the reforms to the Aboriginal Lands Trust or the Aboriginal Affairs Planning Authority Act come through. We need to make sure that, firstly, the opportunities are being eminently and sensibly arranged so that they can proceed with speed and efficiency; secondly, that there is no deflection of government responsibility, particularly around those common assets on those lands.

I will again raise part of my discussions during those two weeks of travelling. I was in the Ngaanyatjarra lands in Warburton and there was the same issue around the discussions from the department about the divestment process. There are real concerns about the assets and how they will be treated going forward. I hope that the department is doing a better job on this than it did on the Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Act. There was an appalling breakdown in the level of consultation around that. I hope that it, or the government should I say, does a better job. I feel for those poor officers that are out there having to take the wrath of the community because there has not been enough —

Several members interjected.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR (Hon Dr Sally Talbot):** Members! Would you like to resume your seat, thank you. As the honourable member has already pointed out, it is not Thursday. We do not do this on a Wednesday.

**Hon NEIL THOMSON:** Thank you, chair. I am not taking interjections. I took the advice of Hon Stephen Dawson. I am now making my contribution. To use the words of Hon Stephen Dawson, I will have this point presented in silence, thank you very much!

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There are concerns about how those assets are treated. The main road around the community of Warburton is falling apart. There is a lot of concern about the process of how it is maintained over time. We hope that this process is managed in a way so that government does not just hand over those liabilities. When I was an officer working in this area, I went over the complete asset base. There is over \$3 billion worth of assets on that estate and it needs to be managed. Often, most of those assets are not on anyone's balance sheet. That is a real problem because then the cost of maintaining those assets is not properly transparent. We know that is very difficult to maintain in those remote areas. I hope that the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs does a much better job on this reform than has been done on the Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Act reform. As we speak, there are huge concerns in the community that have not been properly engaged. I refer to page 18 in which all the assurances were given by the government that there would be consultation and co-design processes associated with the Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Bill 2021. Sadly, we have seen that successive ministers hide behind their poor public servants, who have had to go out.

On 18 November 2021, I spoke about this issue and some of the concerns, which is about the time that we were considering these annual reports. The minister at the time, Hon Stephen Dawson, refused to go on Country Hour to explain himself and those reforms and to front up to the media. We have seen a pattern of this government refusing to speak about these issues in the media and refusing to answer the very difficult, but totally reasonable, questions that have been asked by the community about how this will work. Finally, today we saw the honourable—I assume he is honourable; he is a minister—Mr Buti get on 6PR to try to explain the issue surrounding swimming pools. My goodness! We are at the eleventh hour and we are now explaining it. I can tell members that it takes a bit of working out and it is not actually transparently out there. I had to go into the regulations —

**Hon Kyle McGinn** interjected.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** Member, can I suggest that you direct your comments to me. Do not refer to other members in the chamber—just direct your comments to me.

**Hon NEIL THOMSON:** I will direct them to you and I will not be taking interjections.

The issue on this matter of swimming pools is that the process of identification is three steps. It has to be referred back to the act and regulations and then to the Planning and Development (Local Planning Schemes) Regulations 2015 to find the exempt categories under the deemed approvals provisions. That is where it can be found out. The minister has taken all this time to finally come out and speak about it, because it is an issue that people are concerned about. Why was a fact sheet not put out for every different landholder, including landholders in metropolitan land? Why was a fact sheet not put out for those people on the very urban fringes of the city who own two or three hectares, who live along the Murray River or out there in Baldavis? Why were those fact sheets not presented and put up months ago so that people could actually understand their obligations under the new provisions?

This is the problem. We saw the outrageous and disgusting calls of racism in the other place. I take total exception to that. I find it deeply offensive because there is nobody in this place who has done more! I stand up for Aboriginal people and I will be a voice for them in this place!

**Hon Kyle McGinn** interjected.

**Hon NEIL THOMSON:** They need a voice because even the local member from the Kimberley has not bothered to go to some of those communities! I have spoken to those members, and I will speak up for people. I find it deeply disgusting and offensive to be called a racist in this place by anybody! If you weaponise that, I will speak up against that because that is what the Labor Party does! It weaponises every cause in order to gain an advantage. What a disgrace! I will stand with the Aboriginal people and the protection of Aboriginal heritage in this place, but I will not stand for the incompetence of the Labor government!

**Hon SHELLEY PAYNE:** I stand to talk on the eighty-sixth report of the Standing Committee on Estimates and Financial Operations, *Consideration of the 2020–21 annual reports*.

I would like to go back to some of the comments made by my colleague Hon Pierre Yang about the fact that this was a difficult time. It was the middle of the COVID pandemic and we had to do a lot to adapt, and adapt quickly, to emerging situations. One of the agencies that is covered by this report is the Department of Education, which I would like to spend a bit of time talking about. This report contains a few comments on that department, particularly in regard to some supplementary appropriations associated with expenditure on additional COVID cleaning in schools, and key performance and efficiency indicators that could not be reported for education, particularly with regards to cancelling the NAPLAN assessments due to COVID-19. I just want to talk a bit about the Department of Education and its annual report.

There were many challenges that year, 2020–21. Not only was there COVID, but also the Wooroloo bushfires, cyclone Seroja, flooding in the Gascoyne, lots of things that really disrupted education and kids going to school. But COVID was the biggest disrupter at that time. In 2020, my daughter was in year 12; I had a son in year 11 and another son in year 9. It was a challenging time to be a parent. Granted, I did not have to babysit those children when they

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were not able to go to school, but it was still challenging with children doing their ATAR studies and having disruptions to their schooling. There were a lot of unknowns, particularly for my daughter in year 12; her ball was cancelled, country week was cancelled and there was a lot of uncertainty about the exams and how they would be done. In fact, she was quite sick during the ATAR exams and was encouraged not to go. Showing up to exams needing tissues and coughing and that sort of thing is never a good thing, but at the same time she did not want to miss her exams.

I want to commend Hon Sue Ellery for her management of the Department of Education during that time and quickly soon after the state of emergency was declared, the Department of Education set up its incident management team, which was great, with intentions to reduce the transmission risk at school, ensure continuity of teaching and ensure the provision of really appropriate advice, particularly to parents and the way that they communicate to parents through that time. I remember my son coming home and telling me he had to line up to come into the classroom and use the hand sanitiser, and how it stunk and how terrible that was, and how he had to wear a mask. The school was great, disseminating rapid antigen tests to families, who could come and pick up their packs of 15 RATs at different times. It was really great the way that schools were used to get RATs out into the community.

I also want to commend the school on how quickly it moved to get ready for online learning. I remember quite a few days when my kids would say that they were not going into school that day because they were doing an online session to make sure that everyone could get on before they went to school later in the day. The schools very quickly got that organised in preparation for when students might have to study from home. It just shows us how fortunate we were compared with some places such as Melbourne and what it had to do and the amount of time students there had to spend learning from home. We did not get too many disruptions here in Western Australia. There was sort of a bit of a delay in 2021 to the start of the school year, and a disruption in 2020 when we first went into the state of emergency, but other than that, it was not too bad. However, I think there were a lot of mental health impacts on kids at school through that sort of unknown period that everyone was trying to adjust to.

As I said, some of the extra commitments the government had were recognised in the report, such as the extra \$81 million to support schools with enhanced cleaning. Looking at the attendance figures in the annual report, apart from those two times I mentioned when disruptions happened, the attendance level was pretty high at 90 per cent. It was pretty good. Of course, as noted in the report, the attendance level for Indigenous students was a lot lower at 73 per cent. I was pleased to see that the department did a lot during 2020–21 to create culturally responsive schools, particularly with their KindiLink programs. Fifty-five KindiLink programs operated during that financial year. They are great programs designed for Aboriginal children and their parents. A lot of these KindiLink programs allow all members of the community to join, such as the one I visited in Katanning. The Follow the Dream program was in 84 public schools with over 1 600 Aboriginal students. The Clontarf Foundation was operating in 31 schools. There was also the Girls Academy.

Particularly I have mentioned the mental health issues, and I just wanted to talk briefly on that and the work that the Department of Education has noted in its annual report to support student wellbeing and school psychologists. There were over 363 school psychologists in 2020, which was up from 355 in 2019. It refers to some of the suicide prevention training that was delivered by Mental Health Commission to 559 public school staff. People might not know, but Esperance is the highest funded headspace in Australia, and 2021 was a difficult time for Esperance and Esperance Senior High School with a number of suicides and attempted suicides. I want to send my condolences to the families and thank the department for its support of the high school at that time, particularly with getting external specialist skills such as through Armed for Life, which came down and helped provide support to the schools. Some ongoing work is happening now with collaboration through the Department of Education bringing headspace into the school environment and allowing it to run some programs and engage with students there, rather than requiring students to go outside of school hours to get those services.

The final thing I want to mention that is referred to in the annual report is our commitment to STEM, which I am really proud of, whether it is upgrading STEM classrooms, our STEM resource grants of \$25 000 that we delivered for schools or the science labs to which we have committed. Esperance Senior High School has received \$2 million for a new STEM classroom and money is going to Katanning Senior High School as well as Narrogin. A lot of the primary schools out in the regions are also getting money for their science labs. I am really pleased about that commitment.

One more thing before I close. The \$200 million maintenance blitz program is running and has been really great for upgrading a lot of the schools around Western Australia. The \$200 million program was substantially completed during that financial year 2020–21.

In closing, I want to commend the Department of Education.

**Consideration of report postponed, pursuant to standing orders.**

**Progress reported and leave granted to sit again, pursuant to standing orders.**