



STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

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STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

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[The committee met at 08:30.]

Chair Wotherspoon: — Okay, folks. Good morning. We'll convene the Standing Committee on Public Accounts. I'm Trent Wotherspoon. I serve as the Chair of the Public Accounts, MLA [Member of the Legislative Assembly] for Regina Mount Royal. I'll introduce the members of the committee: Deputy Chair, MLA Thorsteinson; MLA Bromm; MLA Keisig; MLA Gordon; MLA Pratchler. And MLA Martens is substituting for MLA Chan.

We have the following documents to table: PAC 103-30, Ministry of Education: Report of public losses, June 1, 2026 to August 31st, 2026; PAC 104-30: Ministry of Community Safety: Response to a question raised on the October 1st, 2026 meeting.

I'd like to introduce and welcome our officials that are with us here today. From the Provincial Comptroller's office, Brent Hebert, Provincial Comptroller, and joining him is Gabriel Plosker, who's the director of financial management. Thanks for being here.

I'd like to welcome and introduce our Provincial Auditor, Tara Clemett, and welcome all of her officials that are here with us here today. And they'll be introduced as each of the chapters come along.

Social Services

Chair Wotherspoon: — And at this time we'll turn our attention to the first set of chapters, all pertaining to the Ministry of Social Services. I'd like to welcome Deputy Minister Wagar to the committee and all the officials that have joined him here today, all those that have been involved in the work that we're discussing here today. I'll kick it over to DM [deputy minister] Wagar to just briefly introduce the officials that have joined him here today. Maybe refrain from getting into the chapters at this time. I'll come back to you after we have a presentation from the auditor.

Blair Wagar: — Great. Thank you, Mr. Chair, and good morning, everyone, to Chair and committee members. I'll take a moment to introduce colleagues that I have with me here today: Tobie Eberhardt, assistant deputy minister, child and family programs; Joel Kilbride, assistant deputy minister of finance and corporate services; Giselle Marcotte, assistant deputy minister of disability programs; and Julene Restall, assistant deputy minister, income assistance. Other ministry officials are also in attendance. They will introduce themselves if they are required to answer questions.

And we are ready to provide you with updates on the status of auditor recommendations and look forward to answering your questions. Back to you, Mr. Chair.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Right on. Thank you very much. Welcome to you all. I'll kick it over now to the Provincial Auditor to make presentation on the newest chapter, chapter 7 from the 2026 report volume 1.

Tara Clemett: — Thank you, Mr. Chair, Deputy Chair, committee members, officials. With me today is Mr. Jason Wandy. He's the deputy provincial auditor that is responsible for

work at the Ministry of Social Services. And then behind him is Ms. Michelle Lindenbach, and she's our liaison with this committee.

Jason's going to present the chapters for the ministry in the order that they do appear on the agenda, and that will result in four separate presentations. We will pause for the committee's discussion and consideration after each presentation. The first presentation does include five new recommendations for the committee's consideration related to monitoring group homes. The remaining presentations include status updates on outstanding recommendations that the committee has previously agreed to.

I do want to thank the deputy minister and his staff for the co-operation that was extended to us during the course of our work. With that I'll turn it over to Jason.

Jason Wandy: — Thank you, Tara. Chapter 7 of our 2026 report volume 1 reports the results of our audit of the Ministry of Social Services' processes to monitor group homes providing care to children, for the 12-month period ending November 30th of 2025. We concluded the ministry had effective processes other than the areas reflected in our five recommendations.

The ministry licenses and monitors group homes providing care to children. It funds and partners with community-based organizations to provide a home-like setting as a healthy, nurturing, and supportive living environment for children in care. At September 2025 the ministry licensed 177 group homes with 885 children in care at those group homes in Saskatchewan.

On page 127 we recommend the Ministry of Social Services use a risk-based approach for conducting its detailed reviews at group homes caring for children, to confirm quality of care provided. The ministry conducts detailed reviews at a few group homes each year to confirm whether homes meet select standards of care as required by its residential services manual, covering areas such as sleeping accommodations, medication administration, nutrition, and critical incident response.

The ministry conducted four detailed reviews in 2024-25 and six detailed reviews of group homes during 2025-26 up to November of 2025. The ministry does not set an annual schedule based on risk for its detailed reviews. The ministry indicated it considers its last completed review; the ages of the children residing at a group home; and number of allegations it has received such as those relating to abuse, neglect, or quality of care. The ministry could not provide evidence of how it prioritized when it conducts detailed reviews.

Our analysis of the ministry's data about its detailed reviews found 71 per cent or 126 homes had not had a detailed review completed for over five years, with one home last reviewed over 20 years ago. Our testing of three group homes without a detailed review since 2017 found all three homes had allegations relating to staff and/or quality of care between December of 2024 and October of 2025. Not formally assessing risks when planning detailed reviews of group homes does not allow the ministry to effectively prioritize reviewing high-risk group homes first. This can delay identifying and addressing key areas of non-compliance that impact children's safety and well-being.

On page 130 we recommend the Ministry of Social Services issue detailed review findings reports to group homes caring for children within a reasonably set time frame. The ministry compiles findings from a detailed review into a report reviewed by several levels of ministry management prior to sharing findings with the group home. We found the ministry had not set an expected time frame for completing and sending findings reports to group homes timely.

For the three detailed reviews tested, we found one review occurred in September 2025 and the ministry had not yet prepared the findings reported at the time of our testing, 70 days after the review occurred. The remaining two detailed reviews had findings reports provided to group home operators 113 and 127 business days respectively after the review, which exceeded our expectation of 30 business days to complete reporting. These findings reports included concerns such as group home staff giving children medication without confirming they ingested it.

Not reporting detailed review findings timely to group home operators increases the risk that homes do not address identified deficiencies timely, which impacts the quality of care children receive.

On page 132 we recommend the Ministry of Social Services track the implementation status of corrective action plans to confirm group homes caring for children address non-compliance issues identified during detailed reviews. During detailed reviews, ministry staff often find deficiencies such as non-compliant areas in a group home. Where ministry staff identify a significant concern to children's safety and well-being, they report it to the group home operator immediately for resolution.

For other, less significant deficiencies, the ministry waits to inform the group home via a recommendation in its findings report. Once a group home receives the ministry's findings report and recommendations, the ministry requires the group home to complete an action plan detailing how it plans to address the recommendations.

We found the ministry typically allows one to three months or three to six months for a group home to address its recommendations, depending on the severity of the deficiency and the nature of the corrective action. We found the ministry does not centrally record recommendations and expected corrective actions or implementation. The ministry needs to know the status of implementation to effectively oversee actions group homes take to prevent future non-compliance. Not tracking the status of group homes' corrective action plans to respond to non-compliance concerns increases the risk that deficiencies go unaddressed.

On page 138 we recommend the Ministry of Social Services analyze key information — for example, serious incidents, serious complaints investigated, deficiencies identified during detailed reviews — related to group homes caring for children.

The ministry analyzes some key information such as space utilization to confirm homes do not care for more children than permitted, but more analysis is needed on serious incidents, serious complaints investigated, and detailed reviews at group homes.

The ministry's quality assurance unit tracks serious incidents and reports annually to senior management. For example, as high-impact serious incidents occur, such as a death or serious injury requiring significant medical attention, we found the ministry provides individual reports to senior management outlining what occurred and the outcome of its investigation. The ministry does not indicate on the tracking document whether the care at a home was a contributing factor to a serious incident.

In June 2024 the ministry's provincial resource assessment team began tracking all serious complaints received as well as began reporting quarterly to senior management. However management indicated it did not have sufficient data to perform any type of trend analysis such as a year over year or by type of serious complaint. It planned to do so once it has sufficient information available.

Additionally we found the ministry had not established a method to monitor and analyze overall results from its detailed program reviews at group homes. For example we found a common theme in our testing of three detailed reviews. In two of those reviews, staff at group homes were not fully aware of the procedures for reporting allegations made against a group home staff member.

By not analyzing trends on key data related to group homes, it increases the risk of the ministry not making necessary changes to processes, educating group homes on areas of concern, or adjusting legislation to address incidents or deficiencies occurring in group homes caring for children. Such analysis could also assist the ministry in selecting higher risk homes for detailed program reviews.

On page 138 we recommend the Ministry of Social Services centrally track key information, for example licensing, detailed reviews, serious incidents, or serious complaints related to group homes caring for children.

The ministry does not centrally track all findings related to individual group homes caring for children. We found different units within the ministry track information related to group homes in different databases. For example, one unit tracks licences issued and those group homes with conditional licences, while another unit tracks detailed reviews. Without centrally tracking information on each group home in one location, the ministry is unable to effectively monitor and analyze homes to identify and examine trends on what happens in a particular home. There is a risk that areas of concern are not identified, compiled, and mitigated appropriately.

I'll now pause for the committee's consideration.

Chair Witherspoon: — Thanks so much for the presentation and the focus of the chapter. These are new recommendations that are before us here today. I'll kick it over to DM Wagar for brief comment. And before I do that I guess I'll table the document PAC 105-30, Ministry of Social Services: Status update, dated October 13th, 2026. And thanks to whoever prepared that, and thanks to all whose work is reflected in that document. DM Wagar, go ahead with some remarks, and then we'll see what we have for questions.

Blair Wagar: — All right. Thank you, Mr. Chair. Related to the recommendation that Social Services use a risk-based approach

for conducting detailed reviews of group homes caring for children to confirm the quality of care provided, the ministry is in the process of implementing the recommendation.

The ministry maintains a strong collaborative relationship with group homes, allowing for detailed reviews and ensuring they are properly equipped to deliver high-quality services to meet the needs of children in their care. We also have established multiple oversight and accountability mechanisms to ensure group homes consistently meet required standards and are able to effectively support children that they are providing care to.

Since the audit was completed, child and family programs has made progress to meet the recommendation by reviewing assessment processes used by other program areas of the ministry as we begin to develop a specific approach in child and family programs, initiating a jurisdictional scan to identify leading practices for risk-based review planning, and beginning to develop a centralized tool to support implementation of a risk-based approach.

Building on this initial work, we're planning the following actions to implement the recommendation by the end of December of 2026. We will develop and implement a risk-based approach to support detailed reviews and incorporate information from allegations, investigations, and licensing data into the new central tool to inform planning.

Related to the recommendation that Social Services issue detailed review findings reports to group homes caring for children within a reasonably set time frame, the ministry is in the process of implementing the recommendation.

[08:45]

The ministry has strengthened review capacity through dedicated resources, including positions that are focused on intake, protocols, reviews, and action plan monitoring. Status and progress report mechanisms have been implemented to support review tracking, performance monitoring, and ongoing oversight. An action plan is in place to lead the work.

To fully implement this recommendation by the end of November 2026 we will establish service standards for the review process, including targets to support timely completion of reporting of reviews, and continue to identify opportunities to streamline the review-report process and implement overall efficiency.

Related to the recommendation that Social Services track and implement status of corrective action plans to confirm group homes caring for children address non-compliance issues identified during detailed reviews, the ministry is in the process of implementation.

As I previously mentioned, work has begun to develop a centralized tool that will support ministry staff responsible for group home oversight to track implementation of corrective action plans, monitor progress, and manage follow-up activities with group homes. Using the centralized tool, the ministry will fully implement this recommendation by the end of November of 2026 by enhancing existing tracking to include outstanding recommendations, time frames and due dates, and establishing a

formal process to address instances where a group home has not implemented corrective action.

Related to the recommendation that Social Services analyze information — for example serious incidents, serious complaints investigated, deficiencies identified during detailed reviews — related to group homes caring for children, the ministry is in the process of implementation.

The development and implementation of our centralized tool is also at the core of our plan to implement this recommendation. The ministry has initiated assessment information currently collected by child and family program teams that work with group homes to identify data that warrants further analysis. Once a centralized site is launched, these teams will meet on a quarterly basis to review and discuss developing concerns, share data, and analyze trends. This recommendation is also on track to be fully implemented by November of 2026.

Related to the recommendation that Social Services centrally track key information — for example licensing, detailed reviews, serious incidents, serious complaints — related to group homes caring for children, the ministry is in the process of implementation. Using the centralized tool that is in development, the ministry plans to also meet this recommendation by November of 2026.

Key information maintained by child and family program teams involved in group home tracking will be added to the central tool to support centralized tracking, analyzing, and sharing of key group home oversight information. Quarterly reviews will also be used to support information sharing and coordinated responses across teams involved in group home oversight.

I'll now turn it back to the Chair.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Okay, thank you. Thanks very much. I'll open it up now to committee members that may have questions. MLA Pratchler.

Joan Pratchler: — Thank you, Chair. Good morning and welcome.

Could you help me understand why up to now there has been no risk-based approach in conducting reviews? On page 126 it appears that it was a challenge to explain how reviews are prioritized, since they were not risk based. Could you explain now and help me understand that?

Blair Wagar: — I can start. Thanks for the question. I think . . . I mean I can't speak to kind of the why we weren't using a risk-based model. We were using a compliance-based model where we set out standards and then we audit and license against all of those standards. So that was the approach that was taken, based on the review.

And within that compliance-based system there is still a risk-based lens that's put on a lot of the work that the ministry has done. But now with the audit, just continue to build out a much more risk-based focus in terms of how to analyze the group homes themselves and target those based on the information that's collected, using that risk-based lens as opposed to strictly a compliance-based lens.

So there's still a tremendous amount of oversight that's been in place all along. So lots of interaction and engagement with the group homes. So it's not like we've not been engaging with the group homes; it's just a different lens in which we take some of that information and use it to further engage and focus. So I'll stop there and see if there's anything that Tobie can add.

Tobie Eberhardt: — Good morning, everyone. Tobie Eberhardt, assistant deputy minister for child and family programs.

Previously we were doing maybe an informal risk-based approach. We would look at new homes. We would prioritize if there was a number of allegations in the home. I think with this recommendation it's really about us formalizing that and having sort of something that we can go to and show why we've picked which homes we're doing. So we appreciate that recommendation, and it is something we are working on.

Joan Pratchler: — Thank you. By your most recent count, how many homes have not had a detailed review completed in the last five years?

Tobie Eberhardt: — So I would say that, first of all we do do a review of each home every year through our conditional licensing process. And so someone's in the home assessing it for certain standards to ensure the safety and well-being of children. The detailed review, I don't have the number for which homes haven't had a detailed review. The number is smaller than it would be for licensing. Obviously with a detailed review we're maybe doing an average of 10 homes, 10 to 12 homes a year.

And we determine with the detailed review as well, one of the things we look at is, for example, if it's a large organization such as, say, Ranch Ehrlo who's accredited and we know that there's a number of oversights that are in place, we might not prioritize doing a review of all their homes. We might do one or two as part of that, but then we will want to look at the homes that are newer.

Joan Pratchler: — How many of those schedules for review are for next year, 10 or 12? Are you saying that that's what the typical is?

Tobie Eberhardt: — As a result of this audit and recommendations, we are looking to enhance the number of the reviews each year. So we will be doing more than 12; we're just right now figuring out which ones we'll do.

Joan Pratchler: — And what's the longest period any currently operating home has gone without a review?

Tobie Eberhardt: — I think that in the auditor's report they found that there was one home that had gone 20 years. That would be one of the homes at Eagle's Nest, so again another large organization where we're in working with them regularly. But one specific home perhaps was not reviewed.

Joan Pratchler: — On page 127 it says you had one manager and six staff that were responsible for doing these detailed reviews. And if you have 177 homes divided by six staff, that's 29 per, which works out to roughly one every . . . anyway, you can do the math as well as I can. Do you have enough staff to do that?

Blair Wagar: — So I appreciate the question for sure. I think that's the importance of that risk-based approach versus compliance-based where you start assessing how do you best utilize the resources that you have and making sure that you're dealing with those homes that present the largest risk to you based on the evidence and data that we're collecting.

So that's where that centralized model will come in to be very, very effective for this team to be able to look at where they're best able to utilize the capacity that we have.

Joan Pratchler: — And so in the risk-based approach, it's not after the incident happens. I'm assuming that part of that risk-based approach is to help prevention of those things. Is that correct, or can you help me understand that?

Tobie Eberhardt: — The risk-based approach would be to identify which ones we should be going in to do that. I think, as was mentioned in the report, we have a number of teams that work with group homes. We have about five different types of teams that work closely with group homes.

We have our licensing team that's in there every year; they're looking at those standards. We have our provincial resource assessment team. So they are the ones that are going when there's a report that could be a concern. They're the ones that go in. They assess the report, they determine whether or not it meets the standard for maybe a quality of care concern or investigation, and then they're working with them at that point.

We also have our team that works around that contract. So each group home has a contract on what service they're providing. We have a team that works with the group home making sure that they're living up to the contract outcomes that are there.

And we also have an operational oversight unit, and this is a team that goes in when a group home is identified that may have some staffing challenges or some concerns. They'll go in and they'll work with the group home around training of staff around processes. And then we have our quality assurance team who receives reports of any serious occurrence and does their work with that.

So we have a number of teams that work with group homes. The resident services unit, I mean they're really looking at sort of that bigger picture, and so the intent was not necessarily that they would be into every group home yearly. It's about really taking all that information and helping the group home ensure that they're meeting all our standards.

Joan Pratchler: — So through this whole review I'm sure you've identified some of the challenges or barriers to be able to do, you know, what needs to be done or what is important to do. Given some of those barriers, what are some of the successes that you're able to mitigate some of those barriers to make it better?

Tobie Eberhardt: — I think one of the main ones that we're working on right now is, as I'd mentioned, there's a lot of teams working with group homes. And as the auditor recommended, it's really about how do we capture that all in one place so everyone's getting a full picture.

So we really have an integrated approach when we're supporting

group homes. But we want to make sure everyone's doing their job; we want to make sure that they're communicating. And there's one place that we can see what everyone is doing so we can start to see some of those patterns.

So I think that that's one of the big take-aways that we're working on, and I think that's going to help us really target where we need to put our most effort.

Joan Pratchler: — Thank you.

Chair Wotherspoon: — MLA Gordon.

Hugh Gordon: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. My question is going to involve the detailed review findings reports and the length of time that it takes to do that. I'm wondering if you could share with the committee today, you know, how many of these reports are completed outside the current 30-day window. How many may have been completed inside of it, and how many are still outstanding? You know, essentially what I'm getting at here is, you know, why are these reports taking longer than usual according to the auditor's report? I'm wondering if you could speak to that for the committee today.

Tobie Eberhardt: — So I'll start off with a bit of, you know, the review process, and I believe the auditor's office spoke to this. When a review is conducted on site, they meet immediately on site with the leadership to identify any immediate concerns or any things that they need to address right then and there. So there's that feedback provided initially, as well as a follow-up email communication about some of the general findings.

Our team then goes back to do more of the detailed review, and that is taking longer. So we have 12 reviews that have been finalized over seven organizations since November of 2025, and we have nine reviews right now in various stages of approvals. And so right now what we're targeting is . . . In '26-27 we were targeting a 90-day turnaround. So that was for the detailed report, and we're certainly looking at that. It is quite detailed. And we're looking at other efficiencies that we can get the information out quicker.

Part of the detailed report then is working with the organization around what are they going to do to address that. And so I think we've been trying to be very collaborative on working through those processes, but recognizing that we do really need to get them the final report earlier. And so our target would be 60-day turnaround in '27-28.

Chair Wotherspoon: — MLA Gordon.

Hugh Gordon: — I was just wondering if that means that, in fact, the most concerning homes are the ones who aren't receiving much-needed feedback about their areas of concern. Like you're saying this is a process. It's why there's a bit of back-and-forth going on, correct? There's information flowing both ways while you're doing the detailed report. And that's essentially what's been explaining the difference in times for some than others, depending on the circumstances, depending on if they have on-site review.

And then if they get on site, I presume, depending on how many issues they may encounter, then they also have to investigate that

to some degree. You're confident then that you'll be able to bring that down with the recommendations that the auditor has provided?

[09:00]

Tobie Eberhardt: — Yes, I am. The other thing I just want to emphasize is that if it's an allegation of abuse or neglect, that goes through a different process. So that goes through our provincial resource assessment team. And so those timelines are more immediate. Depending on what the allegation is, we're out there either same day or within five days.

So that's a bit different. I just want to be clear that if there was an allegation of some kind of abuse or neglect, we would be out there immediately or within the time frames. And that's a different report that's being written for that, for those instances.

Hugh Gordon: — Thank you.

Chair Wotherspoon: — MLA Pratchler.

Joan Pratchler: — I'm going to ask a few questions about the criteria for significant concerns. How many significant concerns did staff identify in the last year? And are there formal criteria for significant concerns, or is that more left up to the professional, you know, judgment of the people going in? And are any formal criteria for giving one to three months or three to six months to address significant concerns?

And then follow up as well with how many instances of non-compliance with recommendations occurred in the past year.

Tobie Eberhardt: — So thank you. So I'll start off talking about the formal criteria, how many significant concerns in the last year. So our provincial resource assessment team, who responds to allegations of abuse or neglect, from April '26 to September '26, they received 123 intakes. Those are reports regarding group homes.

Through their assessment process — and they do have a formal assessment process, but there is flexibility because again it's a bit of a consensus — you've got a team that sits down, so you could have folks from our child protection teams, folks from our teams that work with group homes, folks with our out-of-home care team. So there's a team that actually sits down and looks at what the allegations are and assesses it. And there's always the ability by a director to either override, so to say that we should respond or not respond depending on what their assessed approach is.

And so of those 123, 37 were determined to be a quality-of-care concern, and 14 resulted in an investigation.

Joan Pratchler: — Okay, thank you.

Tobie Eberhardt: — Sorry, I think the second part of your question was around . . .

Joan Pratchler: — The criteria, whether it's a one to three not to rectify or, you know, longer.

Tobie Eberhardt: — The response. Yeah, right. Okay. So regarding the time frames for response, that comes through the

detailed review, and right now it's more of an informal setting the timelines. So based on what the situation is, working with the organization on what we feel would be a reasonable approach to addressing that.

So there could be some times in a formal review where it's something — a building standard that will take some work to fix. We might work with them to bring in something to mitigate it, and so it all depends on that. So right now there isn't, I guess, a formal point that makes a decision on the timelines.

Joan Pratchler: — Are you worried about that, that some might fall through the cracks if that isn't a specific timeline? Or are you confident that things are getting done as they should?

Tobie Eberhardt: — I would say I'm confident that when there's allegations of abuse or neglect, we are responding to those in a timely manner. I think we have room for improvement, as the auditor's report talks about. And so I think really by developing that centralized tracking where everyone is able to see what's going on and speak together, that I feel that from there we'll look and see whether or not we have to also divine some time frames for some of these resident services reviews.

Joan Pratchler: — Thank you. Just a follow-up to that. Can you help us understand a little bit about non-compliance? Do you know what the rate of non-compliance is for serious or non-serious concerns? What happens if non-compliance is discovered? How quick is the response? Can you just speak to your response to non-compliance, yeah.

Tobie Eberhardt: — So thank you for that question. And as I sort of talked about, we have a number of different teams that work with the group homes. So there's a couple of places there could be non-compliance.

So in our licensing, you know, there could be a conditional licence issued. So currently we have six conditional licences issued across the province. And the conditional licence could be anything from — like I had mentioned before — maybe something to do with something in the home like a locked . . . something that needs to be locked.

We also issue conditional licences, for example, if a group home was approved for four placements but they have the capacity to have more placements. In summertime we find the need for more placements. We might issue a conditional licence just to increase the capacity for that period of time. So through that there is sort of what we're working with them around remedying what the reason for the conditional licence is.

Through our resident services unit there is also the non-compliance around . . . So those are the ones that we're in doing the detailed review, and what they'll do there is really based on risk. So they might go in and assess the home. And it might have, for example, a weight-bearing rod in a room, which is a safety risk for youth. And so they would have them remove that right then.

So there's certain ones that, if it's deemed to be an immediate risk, they would wait and have them do it right then and there. And then the other ones, they would develop a bit of an action plan in conjunction with the group home.

Joan Pratchler: — I think that's all for my . . .

Chair Wotherspoon: — MLA Gordon.

Hugh Gordon: — I was wondering if you could speak to tracking and analyzing the serious incident data. It seems that you were having some struggles in doing that as an agency. And on page 136 it says 37 per cent of serious incidents occur at group homes. Could you share with the committee today what percentage of children in the system reside in group homes? And would you say that the number of serious incidents is proportional?

Tobie Eberhardt: — The second part of . . . Before you said the number of the residing group home, what was the other request?

Hugh Gordon: — Yeah, I'm just wondering if the percentage of children that are in group homes, if there is some correlation between that and the number of serious incidents.

Tobie Eberhardt: — So currently, you know, as of 2026 we had 876. As of June 30th, 2026 we had 876 children in group home placements. And I don't have the percentage, but to compare it to our overall number of children in ministry care — so not counting children who are in the custody of a person of sufficient interest — the overall number of children in ministry care is 4,138.

So group homes are a percentage of that; it's a smaller percentage of that. And it's on actually our web page stats. I probably can tell you what the percentage is. It is 16 per cent children in care at the end of Q1 [first quarter] were in group home placements.

I don't have with me today the number of incidents. We do track that though. We have what we call medium-serious occurrence and high-serious occurrence, and we do a roll-up annually of the medium. So a medium could be something like self-harm that didn't cause, require hospitalization. It could be an injury — fell off a trampoline and broke their . . . So we do track that. I just don't have that with me today, but we do track where they were at the time of the injury. And that's information then we report to our managers up so that they can see some of the trends.

Hugh Gordon: — So you speak a lot about developing the centralized tracking tool or centralized tool to help you do risk-based assessments, tracking and analyzing, and all that. I was wondering if you could speak about that tool. Is that something that's been developed in-house? Is that something you've contracted with a vendor? And could you give the committee an indication or some details about what you hope this tool to be able to do for the ministry?

Tobie Eberhardt: — Thank you for the question. So the development of the tool is an in-house development, and we're really looking at a SharePoint site that we will be able to put the information that we're already tracking into, broken down by group homes to start with. And once we have that, the plan is to have that live, I guess, at the end of this year. From there we'll start to look at are there ways we can start to get some of the analysis done? So whether or not we need someone to do some of that analysis or if there's some technology that can help us, that'll be our second step.

Hugh Gordon: — And you're confident you'll be able to develop this tool within the time frames in your update?

Tobie Eberhardt: — Yes, they're already working on the tool right now.

Hugh Gordon: — Okay.

Chair Wotherspoon: — MLA Pratchler.

Joan Pratchler: — So in this committee we've seen a variety of organizations having IT [information technology] challenges with big rollouts. So what are the plans to mitigate those before they happen or to support the IT services to enable that cross-unit collaboration and analysis? And I guess, in addition to that, when was the last time there was an IT audit of tracking systems? How many unsupported applications does Social Services have right now? Because that all impacts into how you have a robust IT, well-rolled-out, on-time, on-budget process.

[09:15]

Tobie Eberhardt: — So thank you. So what we're building is through a system that's already run, so a SharePoint site. And we've also collaborated with our partners in a different part of Social Services. So disability programs has already developed such a system, so we've been working with them about what they've done, sort of any of the kinks they had to iron out. So we're actually in pretty good shape in what it's going to look like because someone's already done it with in-house.

Joan Pratchler: — And what's your ETA [estimated time of arrival] having this IT system rolled out, functioning?

Tobie Eberhardt: — With the SharePoint, so it's not necessarily a new system. It's already there; we're just, I guess, adapting it for our own needs. And so that will be for the end of this calendar year.

Joan Pratchler: — And are there any unsupported applications in Social Services?

Blair Wagar: — Thanks for the question. I'll do the best I can to answer and may have Tobie or others to join in.

So we do have some — we don't have the specific number here with us — but we do have some legacy systems that are end of life that are not supported any longer. All of those get assessed every year. We're working with our ITD [information technology department] to kind of do a risk assessment.

There is mitigation plans that we have in place. Some of them might be as simple as spreadsheets that we're using. The ministry has actually quite a good track record of delivering fairly large IT projects. So a lot of times there's plans for some of these legacy databases to be converted into our MiCase system it's called, or our Linkin system. So as we move forward or start to see too much risk or have availability of budget to be able to move some of these legacy systems, integrate them into our . . . whether it's the MiCase or Linkin system, we move to do that. So have legacy system unsupported and in many cases have mitigation plans either to continue to manage them as long as we can or plans to transition them over time into our

existing, newer systems.

Joan Pratchler: — That can be a monkey.

Blair Wagar: — Yeah.

Chair Wotherspoon: — MLA Gordon.

Hugh Gordon: — On page 137 it said that group home staff weren't fully aware of procedures to report allegations against their fellow staff. What are you doing to improve education in this area? Are there procedures you have designed to better enable underage residents, for example, to report staff? This would be in connection with your last recommendation and actions you're taking in that regard, I would imagine.

Tobie Eberhardt: — Thank you for the question. As I had mentioned earlier, we have a team called our operational oversight unit that we developed a couple years ago. And so some of the proactive stuff that we are doing now is that team is doing monthly meetings with group home staff where they'll pick a theme or a policy or procedure to remind the group homes on what is the processes, to take any questions. They can also identify if there's an area they want their employees to be trained in. So a group home could also come to that team, one specific group home say we're having some challenges around this, and the team could come in there and do some best-practice trauma and formal care best-practice training.

In addition for the youth that are in the homes, we have a handbook that we've created. It's called the youth in care handbook. It's your right to know, I think it's called. I might get the name wrong. But it's a handbook for youth in care they're given that goes through all their rights that they have and what they can do if they feel that their rights aren't being upheld.

In addition, all group homes are required to post information regarding the Office of the Advocate for Children and Youth and to be able to contact. So a youth in a group home sometimes, if they feel that they're maybe not being listened to, they can also contact the advocate's office directly and the advocate's office could then also help work with them.

Chair Wotherspoon: — MLA Pratchler.

Joan Pratchler: — Thank you. Do you expect central tracking to lead to more frequent detailed reviews? Do you have new targets that you're putting in place as benchmarks, or how many reviews should be carried out? How is that rolling out?

Tobie Eberhardt: — Thank you for the question. I think right now the central tracking is sort of . . . We're now just trying to roll that out to start to see how that helps the teams and helps the communication. At this point, I don't know if it'll lead to more reviews, but I think it's going to give us the evidence on what we need to do. And if it certainly points in that direction that will be something we'll be looking to do in the future.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Looking to committee members, any further questions on this chapter? Not seeing any at this time, I would welcome a motion to concur with recommendations 1 through 5 and note progress.

James Thorsteinson: — I'll so move.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Moved by Deputy Chair Thorsteinson. All agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Okay, that's carried. Okay, we're going to move along to our next agenda item. And I'm going to turn it back over to the Provincial Auditor for presentation.

Jason Wandy: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. In 2019 the Ministry of Social Services began operating the Saskatchewan Income Support program, also referred to as SIS, as a program of last resort to provide financial assistance for people to meet their basic needs while they take steps toward self-sufficiency. During 2025-26 the ministry had an average monthly SIS caseload of over 20,000 clients and planned to provide almost \$264 million in SIS benefits.

Chapter 23 of our 2026 report volume 1 describes the results of our first follow-up audit of management's actions on the six recommendations we first made in 2023 regarding the ministry's processes to deliver SIS. By March 2026 the ministry implemented four of the six recommendations.

The ministry made it easier for potential clients to apply for SIS benefits by bringing services to potential clients through mobile outreach in various communities, offering computers and Wi-Fi at most of its service centres, and striving to return phone calls timely. It also analyzed causes of SIS client evictions, including clients' unpaid utilities, and made changes to help address these issues. For example, it implemented a new \$1,000 one-time utility arrears recoverable benefit for SIS clients. The ministry identified about 1,200 SIS clients with unpaid power and gas utilities totalling almost \$900,000 at June 2025.

Additionally in 2026 the ministry began monitoring whether its staff followed updated SIS service standards that included time frames for scheduling initial planning meetings with SIS clients, following up on clients' individualized case plan goals, and referring SIS clients for housing support and career counselling.

The ministry partially implemented the recommendation on page 244, where we recommended the ministry establish a reasonable time frame for completing initial planning meetings with those SIS clients requiring case management supports.

We found the ministry's updated service standards require staff to schedule initial planning meetings with service level 3 or 4 clients within 30 days of validating their service level. It began preparing monthly reports in January 2026 to monitor staff compliance with its updated service standards.

Our review of the monthly reports found an average of 36 per cent of service level 3 and 4 clients had initial planning meetings scheduled within 30 days of their service level validation. The ministry indicated these results may under-represent the actual scheduling of initial planning meetings with clients due to staff not correctly using the ministry's case management IT system.

The ministry needs to work with staff to ensure that information in the system reflects the initial planning meetings scheduled

with clients so it can effectively assess compliance with its service standard. Without conducting timely initial planning meetings with clients, the ministry is unable to assist clients in developing their individualized case plans. Such planning helps clients to establish goals to work toward self-sufficiency.

The ministry partially implemented the recommendation on page 246 where we recommended the ministry implement further performance measures in assessing the effectiveness of SIS.

The ministry implemented two new performance measures related to SIS in 2024-25. These new performance measures focused on the number of clients who returned to SIS after leaving the program within 12 months, and the number of clients who require less support and yet continue to receive SIS payments for more than a year.

We tested two quarters and found the ministry accurately reported to senior management about the results for these two measures, as well as publicly reported results in its annual report. However the ministry had yet to establish targets for its new performance measures. Ministry management indicated they are using the initial data for these measures as a baseline that can help inform future targets. Setting targets for its new SIS performance measures will help the ministry set out clear expectations to evaluate the effectiveness of SIS and allow the ministry to make adjustments to SIS when targets are not met.

I'll now pause for the committee's consideration.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Thanks very much for the follow-up on this front. Of course we've considered this chapter before this committee, I think in 2025. And thanks for the status update that states the actions that have been taken. Any quick remarks before we get to the questioning?

Blair Wagar: — Yeah, thank you, Chair. Related to the recommendation that Social Services establish a reasonable time frame for completing initial planning meetings with those clients requiring case management supports in the Saskatchewan income assistance program, the ministry now considers this recommendation implemented.

Since the audit, the ministry has met this recommendation by implementing a work plan to strengthen timely client engagement including scheduling initial planning meetings; connecting follow-ups; tracking progress toward case-plan goals and monitoring referrals; implementing a 30-day service standard for scheduling initial planning meetings for service level 3 and 4 clients and developing a report to track this; and providing training sessions for staff focused on client engagement, motivational interviewing, and service standards.

Monthly compliance reporting and management oversight processes are now also in place to support monitoring, accountability, and continuous improvement in service delivery.

Related to the recommendation that Social Services implement further performance measures in assessing the effectiveness of the Saskatchewan income support program, the ministry also considers this recommendation now implemented.

The two performance measures recommended by the auditor

related to client recidivism and client tenure were fully implemented in '24-25. Targets have now been established for both measures and are now publicly reported in the ministry's annual report. The ministry continues to use these measures to evaluate program effectiveness and support evidence-based programming, planning, and decision making.

I'll now turn it back to the Chair.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Thanks very much, DM Wagar, and all those that have been involved in the work reflected in the implementation on this front. I'll open it up now to committee members that may have questions. MLA Gordon.

Hugh Gordon: — Thank you. I believe it says in the report that approximately 70 per cent of calls to the call centre go unanswered. I'm just wondering if you could tell us what percentage of these calls don't get a callback within three days. What's the median call time to get back to those folks? And do you track how many of those calls don't get a callback, whether they leave a name or not, a number or not?

[09:30]

Julene Restall: — Hello, my name is Julene Restall. I'm the assistant deputy minister of income assistance program. So since the audit, we actually looked at our deflected calls that come in to our call centre. So this is specific to the SIS program and the call centre. A deflect is when phone queues are maximized at capacity and a caller is required to call back.

So we actually have been ongoingly reviewing these deflects to ensure if there's any trending. What we've seen is 70 per cent of the callers who were initially deflected were handled within the same day. So that means that we've been able to track those phone numbers within the system, and they actually did talk to somebody that exact day.

Eighty-five per cent of those received a call or a phone conversation within the ministry within three days. So it's 85 per cent within three days. Given the significant volume of calls within the ministry that we receive every month — last month it's about 13,200 — we think this is a pretty responsive response rate for our team to achieve.

The majority of the deflects tend to occur within five business days. So it's as soon as the benefits run and at the beginning of the month. So it's when people were not receiving those benefits. The number of unanswered calls are actually also artificially increased because the person just repeatedly redials the call, so then you don't have a unique caller. It's just the same person calling in again and again.

In our regional offices we've actually added an additional offering to press 0 to actually talk to a person automatically. So if there's a person that's away from the desk, they actually have the ability, our clients have the ability to press 0 and receive an automatic response to an emergency worker too.

Hugh Gordon: — Just to follow up on that, your lunch hour pilot program. I was wondering if you could tell us how many staff are available during lunch hour at each of the three testing sites and whether or not you've consulted with the staff to determine that

that is a sufficient number.

Julene Restall: — Okay, so we actually had Regina and Saskatoon service centres begin remaining open over the lunch hour in October 2025. As of October 2026 we've actually also expanded this to Prince Albert, Yorkton, and Moose Jaw offices. And we'll be expanding this to North Battleford in November 2026.

We've been obviously monitoring that on an ongoing basis and ensuring that we have the appropriate staff levels to actually achieve support over that period of time. And that's why we're looking at being able to expand this, is ensuring that we have the appropriate number of staff in each of those offices to provide those services over the lunch period.

Hugh Gordon: — The question was, was staff consulted to determine if we had the right numbers? Like is there some back-and-forth, making sure that they're able to actually provide that service and that program?

Julene Restall: — We talk to on-site managers regularly to ensure that we have the right complement of staff to achieve the needs of the clients that we serve.

Hugh Gordon: — Okay.

Chair Wotherspoon: — MLA Pratchler.

Joan Pratchler: — I have another little happy face here to celebrate the mobile outreach. It sounds like that was quite positive, or am I right in that? Like what were some of the celebrations you had on that?

Julene Restall: — Sure. That's actually something that we continue to get a lot of feedback on from our community-based organizations specifically, asking for additional resources to support our clients where we are. Currently we're at over 40 different locations within the province. On site we're able to take IA [income assistance] applications for benefits. We're also able to do case planning.

So we really work with individuals to find, for example, stabilized housing or emergency shelter options right on site, and we're able to support them as soon as they walk in. We're actually on location at emergency shelters throughout the province as well as supportive housing units. We've worked really closely with clients at emergency shelters as well as supportive housing to ensure that they're supported in managing their benefits.

So we also align them with our trusteeship services or direct pay of SIS benefits. We really try to take those wraparound services and collaborate with our CBOs [community-based organization] and continue to strengthen our relationships through that approach.

Joan Pratchler: — Congratulations on that. One more question here. To confirm, you measure the success of a SIS client is when they go off the program? And have you accounted for clients who may go off the program because their condition may have gotten worse? And do you have performance measures that can address the amount being paid to clients is sufficient for their survival,

given inflation and those kind of challenges?

Julene Restall: — Thank you so much for your question. So as mentioned, we do actually track our recidivism, so individuals that come back to our program within the 12 months. Right now our target for that is 72 per cent that they leave our programs and do not return. Right now we're achieving 73 per cent for the first quarter of this year, so we are achieving that.

Regarding individuals that might have additional challenges, we really focus . . . Within our programs we do our service level screenings. So that really is a questionnaire to determine the level of need or support that a client needs through the Ministry of Social Services. So with that we have service level 1s, which are considered very employable. And that's about 25 per cent of our caseload.

Then we have SLS [service level screening] 2s, and those are individuals that might need some support, for example, doing résumé building. So we actually directly refer them to our partners at Immigration and Career Training for career services support. And that's about 23 to 26 per cent of our caseload.

Then we have our SLS 3s, which are individuals that have some barriers that really want to kind of build some independence. And those are our individuals that have planning and support specialists, so they actually have IA workers at each of the regional offices. And that's about 65 per cent of our caseload is SLS 3s.

Then we have our SLS 4s. So those are individuals that are having possibly housing instability or challenges managing their money or addictions or mental health challenges. And those are really about 5 per cent of our caseload for our SIS program.

We really focus on those SLS 4s to ensure that they have the support to maintain eligibility for our program. So we really focus on trusteeship, which is we put them on community-based trusteeship. So trustees can manage actually the whole money and the whole benefits for an individual and ensure that their basic needs are met. They can also pay directly their rent and utilities and hopefully help stabilize them in the long term.

So that's really how we focus on ensuring those with the most challenges are addressed in a proactive approach. A lot of those individuals do actually see our mobile outreach workers in community as well.

Regarding your comment about how we determine rates for our programs, when reviewing IA program rates, the ministry reviews low-income and property measures such as the market basket measure or the MBM, Canada's official poverty line, the median and average market rents reported by the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, Saskatchewan's provincial ratings based on the Maytree *Welfare in Canada* reports, as well as minimum wage and inflation rates.

The ministry also takes into account geographical variances by using the tiered approach that considers differences in housing costs in different communities and higher needs of costs of necessities in the northern Saskatchewan administrative district.

So as part of the SIS performance audit, the Provincial Auditor

actually reviewed how the ministry assesses the benefit rates and confirmed that we'd used these inputs as part of the budget process for our program.

Chair Wotherspoon: — MLA Gordon.

Hugh Gordon: — In the last recommendation in your update, we're talking about a couple of measures for client recidivism and client tenure. If I understood correctly, you said that your target for recidivism was 72 per cent. What's the target for client tenure? Is it 28 per cent?

Julene Restall: — No. Target for SIS client tender is the proportion of SIS clients still receiving income assistance over one year. So they've been on our program for one year. So we have a lagging process. That's why we needed some time to create a target. So we have set a target for 40 per cent or less for that measure as well.

Hugh Gordon: — And then with respect to program delivery or services, I'm just wondering what changes you've made since the ministry analyzed the reasons for unpaid utility bills.

Julene Restall: — So when we actually reviewed the unpaid utility bills, that was actually utilizing information from June 2025, where we found about 6 per cent of our caseload had arrears in those. So that actually helped us inform a collaborative budget request and a plan to actually have a new utility-based arrears benefit. It's a recoverable benefit up to \$1,000 that eligible SIS clients can now access to ensure that they're able to pay down those utilities, which actually is our hopes to actually support them in creating more housing stability going forward.

Hugh Gordon: — Thank you.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Any further questions on this chapter? Again this has come back to us, and I think anyone that's observing this knows that this shows kind of the follow-up of this committee, that of the auditor, and then the implementation work of the audit entity. So thanks to those that have taken the actions to get these recommendations off the books and to implement them. And the auditor does do a follow-up after — I don't know what that time period — in the next couple years and reports back here as well.

Not seeing any further questions, I'd welcome a motion of adjournment of this chapter. Moved by Deputy Chair Thorsteinson. All agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

Chair Wotherspoon: — That's carried. I'll turn it back over to the auditor and we'll shift gears with the next chapter.

Jason Wandy: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. The Ministry of Social Services is responsible for children when they require protection and out-of-home care. At December 2025 the ministry had 448 foster families approved to provide care. There were 954 children requiring protection and out-of-home care living with foster families.

Chapter 24 of our 2026 report volume 1 describes our third follow-up audit of management's actions on the three remaining

recommendations we first made in 2020 regarding the ministry's processes to monitor whether foster families provide a safe and secure environment for children in care.

By February 2026 the ministry implemented the three remaining recommendations. The ministry is completing required background checks on all adults in a foster home prior to approving new foster families. We found the ministry also consistently checked its records to identify whether foster care applicants had previous involvement with the ministry, such as a documented history of child abuse or neglect, and it obtained criminal record and vulnerable sector checks for the seven new foster families we tested.

Additionally we found the ministry now obtains criminal record and vulnerable sector checks periodically every three years for all adults residing in approved foster homes. We found the ministry obtained these checks within the last three years for 25 of 26 foster families we tested. The one foster family not having updated checks was because the family had not fostered children since 2024 and closed as a foster home in 2026.

We found the ministry also improved its timely completion of annual review reports of foster families. The annual reviews evaluate whether foster families still meet ministry requirements for fostering children. As of February 2026 the ministry completed review reports during 2025 for 91 per cent of foster families we tested.

Effectively monitoring the safety of children in care and providing needed support to foster families is crucial to nurturing these children's health and well-being.

I'll now pause for the committee's consideration.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Well thanks again for the very important focus of this chapter and for the actions that have been taken on this front. I'll turn it over to DM Wagar for a brief comment, and then we'll see what we have for questions.

[09:45]

Blair Wagar: — Thanks, Mr. Chair. Given all the recommendations are considered implemented, we'll forgo any further comments and just turn it right back to the Chair.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Thank you. Looking to committee members. Any questions on this front? MLA Pratchler.

Joan Pratchler: — Thank you. Could you help us understand how frequently criminal record checks are performed? And is that the same across all foster families or are some identified as higher risk? Is the frequency consistent with other types of housing in the system, let's say, such as group homes? And what is the timeline for response when an offence is discovered?

Tobie Eberhardt: — Thank you for the question. So when a foster parent is first being assessed to be a foster parent, part of the requirement before they are approved is that they are required to complete a criminal record check and a vulnerable sector check for every adult in that home over the age of 18. So that would have to be completed before we approve them as a foster parent.

A number of years ago, as a result of a recommendation from the auditor's office, we brought in a requirement to do a check every three years. So in between we do what's called a self-declaration. So previously to bringing in the periodic criminal record check, as part of their annual review with the foster parent, we'd ask them to self-declare whether or not anything had changed from their previous criminal record check.

As a result of the auditor's recommendation a couple of years ago, we brought in a requirement to have a criminal record check for everyone over the age of 18 every three years. So that has been brought into place now.

Joan Pratchler: — And are you confident that's sufficient to manage risk?

Tobie Eberhardt: — We feel that between that and the frequency we are working with foster parents and having people in the home . . . We have real good partnerships with our foster parents, and we are confident that is managing risk.

Joan Pratchler: — Thank you. How many applicants to become foster care providers last year were found to have criminal records? And how many for sexual or violent offences? How many were flagged for previous involvement with the ministry, you know, a history of child abuse or neglect?

Tobie Eberhardt: — Thank you for the question. We do not keep stats on that, about how many had a criminal record. They would not get past our assessment process so they are cancelled out.

Even before we ask for the criminal record check we go through what is required to be a foster parent. And so I would assume a lot of them would cancel themselves out once they realize they need to get a criminal record check.

Joan Pratchler: — Thank you.

Chair Wotherspoon: — MLA Gordon.

Hugh Gordon: — What's the timeline for an annual foster family report? And is staff carrying out these reports the same staff that carried out the detailed reports for group homes?

Tobie Eberhardt: — Thank you for the question. So we have a different team that works with our foster parents. So every foster parent would have a support worker that's assigned to them, and that support worker is responsible for carrying out an annual assessment. So that's done yearly.

As part of that, they meet with the foster parents. They talk about what's been going well with their fostering, any areas that they want to develop further. They would do a check on the home again with our safety standards. So we have a checklist, anything that's changed within the home. And then they would do the self-declaration I mentioned. Or if it was their time for the periodic criminal record check, that would all be part of that package that's been written up as part of that process. So it's done annually.

Hugh Gordon: — What's the timeline for the annual foster family report? Is it semi-annually is what you say?

Tobie Eberhardt: — [Inaudible] . . . once a year.

Hugh Gordon: — Once a year?

Tobie Eberhardt: — We do it once a year. Sorry.

Hugh Gordon: — Do you have another question? I have a couple of follow-ups. Sorry.

My next questions are with respect to children in foster care. I'm just wondering what efforts the ministry makes to ensure that children placed in a particular foster home remain in that home for the duration of their care. There have been a number of studies around trauma-informed care with children requiring, I'll just say, very stable home environments in order to develop in a number of areas. And I'm just wondering what efforts you make to try to maintain that kind of stability for these young kids.

Tobie Eberhardt: — Thank you for that question. I think I'd start by saying our priority when children come into care is always to try to work with the family to mitigate the risk. And if we're not able to safely return them to their family, to their parents, we are always looking for family. So our priority of placement through our policy is always to try and find family for children in care.

So when a child comes into care, if we can't find family right away, a foster home would be our preference. And we would want to support that foster parent in caring for that child. But the foster parent would be aware, through their training, that we are still looking for family during that placement. And so if a family member comes forward during that placement that we assess is able to meet the child's need, we would transition that child from foster care to extended family placements. So that could happen, and foster parents are very well aware of that and are supportive of that through the training we provide them.

The other part is we do really want to keep stability for children, as you mentioned. You know, we know about trauma and the impact of placement movements. And so we've developed, in partnership with the Saskatchewan Foster Families Association, a number of supports that are put in place for foster parents to help maintain those placements. So we have an in-home support program that the Saskatchewan Foster Families Association operates.

And so that could be if the foster parent is struggling with maybe some of the child's behaviours, we could have someone go in and support that foster parent in caring for that child. We might have some children that are up in the night and the foster parents got other children, so we would help support that by bringing someone into the home to help in the evening for example. The other thing we would do is a foster parent working with them, if they identify the child has got some challenges where they maybe need counselling, we would put that into place.

So we would always work with the foster parent about what are the things that we could put into place to help support that placement, but we would also always be looking for a family for that child on a long-term basis.

Hugh Gordon: — Just to follow up on that because, you know, obviously the children were removed from their primary home

for a number of very good reasons. You've, justifiably so, placed into a foster home obviously with all the, hopefully, requisite supports that they were able to provide that child in the interim, knowing that you're still looking for perhaps a family member. Like that's got to be handled very carefully, correct? Like where you just, you know, making sure that child is not going back into the same situation, that those family members who are able now to care for that child are not going to subject them to, you know, the same situation that they were taken out of, correct?

So I guess my question is with respect to a trauma-informed approach for these kids and for those that you can't find a home for. I'm wondering if you could tell the committee just how many children for which there is no family to return them to, no one steps up to take the child into their care, for those children that are now within the foster home, care home system, how often do those . . . Do you have any idea how often those children change foster homes?

Tobie Eberhardt: — Thank you for the question. I don't have statistics on the movement, how often children might be moved between foster homes and extended family or other placements.

What I could say is, first of all, when we're assessing an extended family member, we've developed a trauma-informed lens for that assessment. The requirements are similar to foster parents' criminal record checks, child welfare checks, safety assessments. So we're very careful about ensuring that the home is prepared to care for the child. Because most of these children do have trauma, and so oftentimes they'll have behaviours as a result of that.

And then we would always want to do a transition plan. So working with the foster parent and the potential extended family caregiver, once they're approved, we want them to be working together closely as a team to ensure sort of the least challenge or the least impact to that child.

And that's all part of the training we provide to foster parents. The model just really talks about and emphasizes that it's really about them supporting family to care for their kids. I know the Saskatchewan Foster Families Association, their motto is like "families helping families." And that's really what it is about.

For children to leave a foster home or for us to move a child from a foster home, it would normally be because either they're transitioning home — that we're working with the foster parent around that — or to a family member, which would be a longer term placement that would allow the child to be connected to their culture and their community. Or it could be sometimes we have a larger sibling group and we're able to find a resource that'll take all the siblings together now. And so that could be another reason why we may transition them from a foster home.

And the final one could be if a foster parent is asking for the child to be moved. Again we would want to work with that foster parent to try and say, you know, what is the situation, why you're asking them to be moved. Oftentimes it's because of behaviours of the child again, you know, resulting from past trauma. And so we would try to mitigate that and put in to supports. But at the end of the day if a foster parent asks for the child to be moved and we couldn't resolve it with them, we would have to look for a new placement.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Any further questions over here? Questions over here? Okay, not seeing any. Again thank you for the work on this front. Certainly, you know, when you start talking about children's lives, right, it puts it all in perspective. So thanks to, you know, all your teams and all those that are involved in providing stability and care to those that deserve it most.

I would welcome a motion at this point to conclude consideration of chapter 24.

James Thorsteinson: — I so move.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Moved by Deputy Chair Thorsteinson. All agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Okay, that's agreed. We'll kick it back over to the auditor and focus on the last chapter pertaining to Social Services today.

Jason Wandy: — Thank you. Chapter 7 of our 2025 report volume 2 reports the results of the annual audit of the Ministry of Social Services for the 2025 fiscal year. We found the ministry complied with authorities governing its activities and had effective rules and procedures to safeguard public resources other than the matters described in our chapter.

During the 2025 fiscal year, the ministry implemented three outstanding recommendations associated with procuring hotel rooms for clients. The ministry maintained sufficient documentation, including appropriate rationale to support the selection of hotels even if they cost slightly more, for its child and family program clients. It also began centrally tracking and monitoring the hotels it pays and at what rates for clients from its income assistance and child and family programs.

[10:00]

For example, its tracking showed that contracted room blocks, which have a set number of hotel rooms available throughout the year, were utilized approximately 75 per cent of the time in Saskatoon and approximately 90 per cent of the time in Regina for a year.

Additionally we found the ministry evaluated its two hotel pilot projects to procure hotel rooms for income assistance and child and family program clients. As a result of the evaluation, the ministry decided to continue to contract a block of rooms in one Saskatoon hotel and one Regina hotel.

The ministry did not implement the recommendation on page 54, where we recommended the ministry work with the Ministry of Finance to consider how to publicly report payments made to vendors like hotels on behalf of income assistance and child and family programs' clients.

We found the ministry had yet to determine how it could publicly report payments made to vendors on behalf of income assistance and child and family programs' clients. The ministry's counterparts in two other Canadian provinces — that is, Alberta and Manitoba — report payee details for payments made to

vendors such as hotels or grocery stores on behalf of clients exceeding a specific threshold. For example, payments exceeding \$50,000. The ministry indicated it paid 10 hotel vendors more than \$50,000 between January and September 2025 for SIS clients, and yet these vendors and the amounts paid were not publicly available.

The ministry indicated it had preliminary discussions with Ministry of Finance staff during fiscal 2024-25 to consider options for publicly reporting payments made to vendors on behalf of clients. It expected to continue these discussions in 2025-26.

The ministry partially implemented the recommendation on page 49, where we recommended the ministry record and recover overpayments related to its Saskatchewan income support program in a timely manner.

An overpayment occurs when the ministry pays a SIS client before receiving all information necessary to confirm a client's eligibility for benefits, where it makes errors in determining benefit amounts, or when a client provides inaccurate information to the ministry. At March 2025, the ministry recorded accounts receivable related to SIS overpayments of \$16.2 million, a 65 per cent increase from 2023-24.

The ministry's IT system used to administer SIS benefits allows staff to establish automatic payment recovery beginning the following month and record the related amount due, as in accounts receivable, as overpayments from future SIS benefits. Our testing of 13 client files with confirmed overpayment issues found staff did not record the overpayments nor set up the automatic payment recovery process for three files, staff did not set up the automatic payment recovery process for nine files, and staff did not set up recovery for one file . . . or sorry, staff set up recovery for one file, but did not do so timely.

Not recording amounts due and not initiating automatic payment recovery delays timely overpayment recovery. The ministry will have limited ability to collect on overpayments if clients leave the SIS program.

I'll now pause for the committee's consideration.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Okay. Thanks for the important follow-up on this front. I'll turn it over to DM Wagar for brief remarks, then we'll open up for questions.

Blair Wagar: — Thank you, Chair. Related to the recommendation that Social Services record and recover overpayments related to its Saskatchewan income support program in a timely manner, the ministry considers this recommendation now implemented.

Since the audit, the ministry has implemented improvements to ensure overpayments are recorded and recovered in a timely manner. We have completed a targeted review of SIS cases with an overpayment to ensure overpayment recovery has been established; delivered training for staff on entering and recovering overpayments in the system; implemented additional system functionality to enable overpayments to be transferred and recovered across cases; and established a specialized overpayment team to review SIS overpayments, ensure

appropriate client notification is issued, verify overpayment accuracy, and establish recovery in accordance with the ministry's procedures.

Related to the recommendation that Social Services work with the Ministry of Finance to consider how to publicly report payments made to vendors on behalf of income assistance and child and family program clients, the ministry considers this recommendation now implemented as well.

In consultation with the Ministry of Finance and following the review of our systems to ensure that they would support accurate, reliable, and consistent reporting, the ministry will meet this recommendation by publicly reporting payments made to vendors on behalf of income assistance and child and family programs as part of Public Accounts volume 2 to be released later this month.

While expanding public reporting, protecting client privacy remains a top priority. No client names or their identifying personal information is included, ensuring the confidentiality of individuals, children, and families receiving services.

We are taking a phased approach to public reporting to ensure that information released is accurate, reliable, and consistent. We'll begin reporting vendor payments for Saskatchewan income support and child and family programs where the necessary reporting capabilities are already in place.

The Saskatchewan assured income for disability program, or SAID, operates a legacy payment system that was not designed to support this type of reporting. Rather than release information that may be incomplete or inconsistent, we will expand public reporting to include SAID once the system and data improvements are completed.

I'll now turn it back to the Chair.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Thank you for the comments. I'll kick it open to members that may have questions. MLA Pratchler.

Joan Pratchler: — Thank you. How many overpayments were recorded in the last fiscal year? What was the median time frame of corrections for those overpayments? Do you track underpayments, and are these flagged primarily by the ministry or the payee? And what's the median time frame for correcting those as well?

Julene Restall: — Thank you so much for the question. Overpayments occur when the ministry paid benefits that a client's not eligible for. So there's many instances in which that might occur. For example, changes in a client's circumstances that are not known to the ministry, such as receiving income or benefits from other programs.

We sometimes, as the auditor mentioned, respond to urgent situations in which we don't have the documentation and once we receive it, receive the documentation, unfortunately the client is not eligible for that benefit. We also issue recoverable benefits, such as security deposits. So that would also be included as part of an overpayment.

We also have administrative errors completed by the ministry.

We don't have a central tracking system that breaks down how those overpayments are assessed or what area those overpayments come into. It's on each individual file. So we wouldn't be able to break down the percentages for you at this time.

As of March 2026 the ministry-recorded overpayments were about \$22 million for SIS, an increase of 36 per cent from the 16.2 million at the end of '24-25, which is trending downwards from the 65 per cent increase the prior year. This lower rate of growth is consistent with expectations of a maturing program. As SIS continues to mature, historical overpayments are added to the outstanding balance while recovering efforts increase, resulting in a more gradual increase to the overall overpayment balance.

So it's actually very interesting because SIS is one of the first programs in income assistance that actually can transfer overpayments from other programs. So part of our overpayment amounts are actually overpayments that were part of the Saskatchewan assistance program, or the SAP program, or the transitional employment assistance program, or the TEA [transitional employment allowance] program.

So as clients have joined onto IA for the SIS program, they might have an outstanding balance from those prior programs. And we've actually put those overpayments back onto their cases right now and set up those recovery rates of \$50 per month to ensure that we're able to collect on those amounts.

So one of the things that you didn't ask about was how are we making sure that we're recovering on the overpayments as quickly as possible. We've actually set up a specialized team at our client service centre that has reporting capabilities to ensure that those overpayment recovery rates are set up as soon as possible. So this is an ongoing process now as part of our procedures. And with that approach we hope to actually be able to recover on overpayments as soon as possible.

Joan Pratchler: — And underpayments?

Julene Restall: — We don't. Sorry, I do not have underpayments tracked in front of me right now.

Joan Pratchler: — And they exist?

Julene Restall: — In certain circumstances, they do exist. But the ministry actually will issue underpayments. So as soon as we're aware of a person being eligible for a benefit that they weren't receiving, we'll actually do an underpayment and assess it to when they started eligibility for that benefit.

Joan Pratchler: — What would be the timeline for doing that?

Julene Restall: — As soon as we're made aware of it.

Joan Pratchler: — Okay.

Chair Wotherspoon: — MLA Gordon.

Hugh Gordon: — What were some of the reasons that staff wasn't setting automatic recovery for these known overpayments? Was there any common themes? Is there any rationale for that?

Julene Restall: — Our ministry has had system enhancements over the time. So as mentioned, SIS was actually implemented in 2019. Since 2019 we have increased our capabilities within the system. So some of the rationale for some of the delays is due to old cases, for example, that had technical issues for setting up overpayments. So by having a specialized team, we're able to kind of do a little bit of analysis to ensure that those overpayments are assessed appropriately and applied to the appropriate files too.

Hugh Gordon: — I have questions with respect to the last recommendation on reporting. I'm wondering if you could elaborate on the phased approach to supplemental reporting and why you feel that's necessary.

Blair Wagar: — So I can start and then we'll turn it over to Julene to maybe explain. But it really goes back to a legacy system, IT system that has some really challenging capabilities to be able to do this. So instead of us jumping out in front, we're focusing on what we can do quickly with the other programs that are on a newer system that has the capability of doing this. And then as we navigate that old system to our new systems, like I was talking about before around the IT question, then we're able to do the same thing with SAID.

Hugh Gordon: — Are you confident though that, between the legacy system and this new reporting system, that you're going to be able to, you know, report accurately enough on what those numbers are with respect to those vendors?

Julene Restall: — So we are doing a phased-in approach for the vendor reporting. So we're starting this month with our SIS caseload as well as the child and family programs. And then once SAID goes onto the MiCase system, that's when we'll be able to ensure consistency and reliability of that information, which will then allow us to respond publicly on the vendor reporting there.

Hugh Gordon: — And my last question with respect to vendors: will the names of the vendors, will that be made public as well? The folks that have been . . . the businesses that have been receiving, I guess, funds from Social Services.

Julene Restall: — So we will be releasing the names of the vendors over \$50,000 that receive benefits through those different programs. We are taking, obviously, client safety and privacy very seriously. So things like trustees, those will not be released because those are obviously benefit administrators, and we want to ensure people have their privacy tracked throughout the process.

Hugh Gordon: — That's all I have.

Chair Wotherspoon: — I'll turn it over to the comptroller right now.

Brent Hebert: — Yeah, just to add to that, I just want to clarify that those payee details will be included in the compendium of payee details that are along with the public accounts reporting package.

Chair Wotherspoon: — And that's the one that will be released here very shortly.

Brent Hebert: — The end of October.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Right. Yeah, good. Thank you very much. MLA Pratchler.

Joan Pratchler: — What is the challenge with that legacy migration?

Julene Restall: — So our SAID program is actually still issued through the SWIN [Social Work Information Network] program, and that is a program from the 1980s. So we just don't have the ability or the confidence in the data that's actually extracted from that because of just the legacy elements. We very much are confident in our other programs, and that's what we'll be starting with for reporting.

Joan Pratchler: — So is it literally the migration of that legacy, or is it creation of a new platform to make that happen?

Julene Restall: — It will be a migration to the MiCase system.

Joan Pratchler: — And what would be your ETA or time of completion?

Julene Restall: — During this fiscal year sometime.

Joan Pratchler: — Okay, thank you.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Any further questions from committee members? Not seeing any. Again thanks for the follow-up on this, Auditor, and thanks for the actions that are being taken to ensure implementation. We'll see the vendor information, as has been identified, in just a couple weeks' time when the volume 2 is released for '25-26. Not seeing further questions, I'd welcome a motion to conclude consideration of chapter 7.

[10:15]

James Thorsteinson: — I'll so move.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Moved by Deputy Chair Thorsteinson. All agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Okay, I think that concludes our questioning in time with Social Services. Thank you very much to all the officials that have joined us here. Thanks to all those that are involved in the very important work that's discussed, all the important work of Social Services. I'd kick it over to DM Wagar for some parting remarks before we kick you all out of here.

Blair Wagar: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. Members of the committee, thank you as well. I appreciate your time and the opportunity to update you on the ministry's progress on the Provincial Auditor's recommendations. I also want to express my thanks to the Provincial Auditor's office for the work you've done with the ministry, and we appreciate the recommendations to help us improve in delivering on the essential services that we provide Saskatchewan people. And I want to take a second to thank the team, who clearly, if were not here, I would be in big trouble answering a lot of these questions. So thank you to the

team and all the great questions. So back to you, Chair.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Right on. Thank you very much. Thanks to you all. And we'll take a very brief recess as we get the Sask Municipal Board before us.

[The committee recessed for a period of time.]

Saskatchewan Municipal Board

Chair Wotherspoon: — Okay, we'll reconvene the Standing Committee on Public Accounts. We're going to turn our attention now to the Sask Municipal Board. Before us here this morning is the Chair, Chad Boyko, as well as director Brandee Murdoch. Thank you for joining us here today. I'm going to come back over to you in a moment after a brief presentation from the auditor.

Tara Clemett: — So thank you, Mr. Chair, Deputy Chair, committee members, and officials. With me today is Mr. Trevor St. John, and he's the deputy provincial auditor that is responsible for the work at Saskatchewan Municipal Board. Behind me is Michelle Lindenbach, and she's our liaison with this committee.

This presentation does include five new recommendations for the committee's consideration related to municipal appeal decisions. I do want to thank the Chair and his staff for the co-operation that was extended to us during the course of our work. With that I'll turn it over to Trevor.

Trevor St. John: — Thank you. The Municipal Board receives funding from the Ministry of Government Relations. In 2023-24 the Municipal Board spent 1.3 million handling appeals and collected 218,000 in revenue.

Under *The Municipal Board Act*, the Saskatchewan Municipal Board, an administrative tribunal, is responsible for hearing appeals regarding disputes arising between Saskatchewan municipalities and other parties like property owners. This includes appeals related to property assessments and zoning and development permits.

The Municipal Board uses various separate committees to handle appeals. Board members serve on these committees to hear and make decisions on municipal appeals. Its two most active committees are the assessment appeals committee, which receives approximately 90 per cent of the annual appeals submitted to the Municipal Board for consideration, and the planning appeals committee. These two committees were the focus of our audit.

Chapter 13 of our 2025 volume 2 reports the results of our audit of Saskatchewan Municipal Board's processes, for the period ended June 30th, 2025, to provide timely and supported appeal decisions regarding disputes arising between Saskatchewan municipalities and other parties such as property owners. We made five recommendations.

In our first recommendation, on page 146, we recommend the Saskatchewan Municipal Board update its appeal guidance to be consistent and fully aligned with legislation. The Municipal Board had an overarching board policy manual that includes procedures for its meetings, board Chair responsibilities, code of conduct, and procedures for each committee. The Municipal

Board also uses various procedures outlined in separate manuals to guide its work on assessment and property appeals.

However we found not all its manuals contain consistent information for the committees to follow. For example we found the planning appeals committee's procedures manual did not include all types of appeals as noted in legislation, such as appeals related to the development permits issued pursuant to the global transport hub authority Act.

We also found the planning appeals committee procedures within the board policy manual had not been updated since 2001. Not consistently and regularly updating guidance increases the risk legislative requirements may not be met or followed during appeals.

In our second recommendation, on page 148, we recommend the Saskatchewan Municipal Board have board members annually review and sign off on its code of conduct, including declaring any conflicts of interest. The Saskatchewan Municipal Board has a code of conduct policy for its board members. The policy includes details on conflicts of interest and bias, aligns with good practice and *The Municipal Board Act*.

We found it clearly written, easy to understand, and included detailed descriptions, definitions, and examples in each area. However the Municipal Board did not have a formal process for its eight board members to annually declare conflicts of interest.

The Municipal Board assigns board members to various panels to hear appeals. It will remove a board member and assign a different board member to the panel if the member has a conflict of interest or if requested due to a perceived conflict of interest. Not requiring board members to annually review and sign off on the code of conduct increases the risk of bias either real or perceived in decisions issued.

In our third recommendation, on page 151, we recommend the Saskatchewan Municipal Board monitor and follow up on property assessment and planning and development appeals in case management taking more time than expected.

[10:30]

The purpose of case management is to have the Municipal Board's case manager meet and work with parties to clarify the grounds of appeal, determine the hearing format, review jurisdictional issues, discuss preliminary matters, and discuss confidentiality of information. The Municipal Board typically receives over 600 assessment appeals in a year and about 20 planning appeals.

The Municipal Board assigned two board members responsibility for case management: one for assessment appeals and the other for planning appeals. These members can delegate case manager duties to other board members as needed.

The Municipal Board expects case managers to take approximately 20 days once the notice of appeal is acknowledged and the appeal is sent to the case manager. For 13 appeals tested, 8 appeals in case management took over 20 days. We found the Municipal Board uses a case management tracking spreadsheet for assessment appeals, but it did not always update the

spreadsheet — for example, missing some dates. The Municipal Board does not track the status of case management for planning appeals.

We also found the Municipal Board does not always follow up with case managers who have exceeded the 20-day target for case management. Without adequately monitoring appeals and case management and following up on those taking more than 20 days, the risk of delays in scheduling hearings increases. As a result, appeals may not be heard within a reasonable time frame, thus delaying a decision.

In our fourth recommendation, on page 158, we recommend the Saskatchewan Municipal Board periodically analyze key stages of its property assessment and planning and development appeal process to determine actions needed to address delays.

On a quarterly basis, the Municipal Board Chair monitors the status of property assessment appeals. On an annual basis, the Municipal Board assesses and summarizes the status of planning appeals. We found the Municipal Board is tracking decision status, and it is meeting its 60-day target for issuing a decision after a hearing is completed over 90 per cent of the time. However delays are occurring before a hearing is held.

We found the Municipal Board does not analyze other key stages of the appeal process, like case management or scheduling, to determine whether appeals progress as expected. The Municipal Board has set expected time frames for key stages in the appeal process. For example it expects case management to take 20 days, as I previously mentioned; scheduling to take seven days; and the whole appeal process from notice of appeal to hearing decision to take approximately 200 days.

For the nine appeals we tested — seven assessment appeals and two planning appeals — we found instances where appeals were taking longer than expected at key stages. Without periodically analyzing its key stages in the appeal process, the Municipal Board may be unable to determine whether it needs to take action, for example providing additional training, hiring staff, or improving IT systems to address any issues causing those delays.

In our fifth recommendation, on page 159, we recommend the Saskatchewan Municipal Board publicly report information about the status of property assessment appeals.

Each year, the Municipal Board reports various statistics with trend information in its annual report. We found the statistics reported in its annual report consistent with other jurisdictions, other than the Municipal Board does not include a summary of the status of the assessment appeals at various stages, such as case management, hearing to be scheduled, or hearing scheduled. We found it only provides us information for planning appeals.

Periodic reporting of all key appeal information would increase the transparency of the Municipal Board's processes and decisions and keep the public better informed about efforts occurring to provide timely and supported appeal decisions.

I'll now pause for the committee's consideration.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Okay, thank you very much for the focus of the chapter and the new recommendations before us. I'll

turn it over to Chair Boyko for brief remarks, and then we'll open it up for questions.

I also want to thank the Municipal Board for the status update that's been prepared and the actions that are reflected there. I'll table that document right now: PAC 106-30, Saskatchewan Municipal Board: Status update, dated October 13th, 2026.

I'll kick it over to Chair Boyko for some brief remarks, and we'll go from there.

Chad Boyko: — Well good morning. The auditor's report identified 13 audit criteria associated with appeal and tribunal good practices relating to the appeals framework, conducting of impartial and timely hearings, and monitoring the performance of the appeal process.

In summary the auditor's report found that the SMB [Saskatchewan Municipal Board] operates with transparency, professionalism, competence, and timeliness. Specifically the auditor noted the SMB provides parties to appeals with ready access to information on the appeal process, that it's clear and easy to understand, our staff are qualified and professional, communication regarding process is provided in a timely manner, written decisions are rationalized, and in general the SMB processes align with good practices.

Overall the SMB operates to ensure parties to appeals have a fair and transparent resolution to the issues before us. Of the 13 audit criteria, the auditor has noted eight areas where the SMB is fully compliant and, as you just heard, made five recommendations to enhance the operations of the organization.

These observations arise in the context of a significant increase in the volume of appeals, many complex, involving millions of dollars in disputed assessment values adjudicated by the SMB in recent years. For example total appeals increased from 1,434 during the 2017 to 2020 assessment period to 2,519 from 2021 to 2024. Last year, in 2025, we processed 1,443 appeals in one year, almost double the number of appeals processed during the first year of the 2021 assessment cycle.

To address the recommendations made by the Provincial Auditor, the SMB approved an internal plan to align with a full adoption of remedial measures. We have completed our action plan to address the identified deficiencies and are reporting full compliance to the auditor and this committee.

I can walk you through the document we've provided, or I can address your questions now.

Chair Wotherspoon: — That's great. Yeah, thanks again and thanks for the actions that have been taken and reported to us that have implemented the recommendations. Let's open it up to committee members now for questions, and then we'll go from there. MLA Pratchler.

Joan Pratchler: — Thank you. Thank you and welcome. What procedures have you put in place to ensure the more regular updating of the guidance and manuals? And is there a maximum interval between reviews for any required updates?

Chad Boyko: — We have undertaken a full review of the policy

and procedure manual, which was reviewed and adopted by our board. And that was undertaken and led by Ms. Murdoch and her team. Now there had been a gap on that. Well that's recently completed.

We will look to what reasonable best practice would be to, you know, continue to review and update policy, I would think, on kind of a . . . will occur as necessary. But you know, certainly legislative changes would initiate a review if there's something that impacts the policies. So that would precipitate the review; otherwise I think maybe a biannual review if there's nothing specific that initiates that process. But for example if there's a change to *The Cities Act* that impacts our appeal processes, we would have to immediately make that change along the lines.

Joan Pratchler: — So biannually unless something else precipitates something more emergent?

Chad Boyko: — Yes.

Joan Pratchler: — Thank you.

Chair Wotherspoon: — We'll just announce as well there's a pretty big trade that's gone on with the Public Accounts Committee here today. It appears for the rest of the day MLA Kropf will be substituting for MLA Keisig. That's for the rest of the day? All right. That's future considerations here, eh. Okay, good.

I'll kick it back over to MLA Pratchler.

Joan Pratchler: — Thank you. I notice in the first recommendation that things needed to be updated in references to the GTH [Global Transportation Hub] and other updates, I'm sure. Are any large-scale data centres referenced in any of the new legislative changes?

Chad Boyko: — Not that would be under our jurisdiction that we're aware of at this time.

Joan Pratchler: — Now talking a little bit more about declared conflicts of interest with regards to, you know, your meetings and things like that, have there been any conflicts of interest declared lately regarding data centres at all?

Chad Boyko: — No, we haven't had any appeals relating to data centres at this time.

Chair Wotherspoon: — MLA Gordon.

Hugh Gordon: — Thank you. I'm wondering if you could share with the committee what the current median timeline of case management broken down by assessment appeals and planning appeals is? What percentage of cases in the last year have taken under 20 days, and what's the longest current timeline of a case? And what appeal that may be, what type?

Chad Boyko: — To have the granular detail, I'm not sure I would have that, but I can maybe provide you a broad overview of the process. And just with respect to the case management, and we do acknowledge the Provincial Auditor's comments, but just to provide a little context on that, any delays that came out of case management — while we certainly did need to memorialize

those, I think, better — any of those delays would have been due to a participant in the process requesting a delay.

We are moving our appeals through as we get them. Currently, even with that large volume of assessment appeals, as we get them in we process them. We move them to case management, and within 14 to 20 days they are scheduled because we are currently current with both the PAC [planning appeals committee] and the assessment appeals.

So you know, I would say that everything that we are dealing with is within those guidelines at this time, and anything that wasn't previously was . . . For example, in a planning appeal you'd have maybe, you know, a party that's going away for the winter asking us if they could have a couple months of delay, postponement while they're on vacation, those sorts of things. Because we have been moving them forward to scheduling as received and processed.

Hugh Gordon: — Just as quick follow-up on that, maybe you touched on the answer to my next question which is, well what are some of the reasons then for, although perhaps undocumented, as to why appeals cases were not dealt with in a timely matter? What were some of the . . .

Chad Boyko: — That would really be it. Some appeals, you know, would be more complex to deal with in a case management standpoint that maybe take more time for what we call the record book to get through, and all the documentation we might be waiting for for the lower . . . We deal with appeals from a lower board. Perhaps there was a delay there to get it to us. But our case managers, once they receive them, are moving them forward unless the parties to an appeal aren't available to meet with them. So that's basically the only delays.

Hugh Gordon: — Thank you.

Chair Wotherspoon: — MLA Pratchler.

Joan Pratchler: — What's the current percentage of decisions appealed to the Saskatchewan Court of Appeal? How does that compare to last year? What trends have you observed over the past five years?

Chad Boyko: — We have 19 total appeals at the end of 2025. So do that math out of 1,400-and-some. I mean the Court of Appeal has shown an interest in municipal law over the last few years. They've provided us some direction that is useful for us certainly in applying to our appeals.

Joan Pratchler: — And what trends have you observed in the last five years in terms of cases being referred to the appeal court?

Chad Boyko: — In the sense of specific issues that would be appealed or . . .

Joan Pratchler: — You'd know your trends. I'm just wondering, are you seeing a pattern?

Chad Boyko: — Well I mean in the sense you have 19 out of almost 1,500. Trends, you know, they are all for the most part assessment appeals. There's been very few planning appeals. There's one in the last five years, which provided some excellent

direction with respect to the standard of review to be applied by the planning appeals committee.

Joan Pratchler: — Good.

Chair Wotherspoon: — MLA Gordon.

Hugh Gordon: — Yes, my question is with respect to analysis. Your update on recommendation 4 on page 158 mentions that you're receiving monthly updates, but it doesn't appear to provide details in your update as to what actual kind of analysis is being done.

Can you tell the committee what analysis gets done with respect to periodically analyzing the key stages of its appeal process to determine action on delays? And if you could also discuss if there are any escalation measures that are identified or required when the analysis gets done.

Chad Boyko: — Ms. Murdoch will respond to that question.

Brandee Murdoch: — For the most part that analysis is timelines. It's days, it's how long they've been sitting. So if you look on our website, it breaks down where the appeals are in the process and how many are sitting there in the days.

[10:45]

That was always provided to our key stakeholders — you know, SAMA [Saskatchewan Assessment Management Agency], SUMA [Saskatchewan Urban Municipalities Association], SARM [Saskatchewan Association of Rural Municipalities]. And now it's provided publicly on our website at the recommendation of the auditor, and it's done monthly instead of quarterly.

So you know, the other part of it is we've been looking at how we categorize because we did put a lot of appeals in case management, and that's where we put them. But you know, when the auditor came in and spoke with us, we realized that we needed more like categories because there could be a case management hold. You know, there are properties that come in, due to the volume, that a property may be at the Court of Appeal. And we won't handle the next year appeal on that until we hear it from the court, right, because the grounds could be similar. They're preserving their right to appeal.

So we have started categorizing a little bit more accurately like which ones are on hold. And again they might be on hold because they've asked to be on hold or just a joint recommendation that we put it on hold until we have, you know, that court decision come in. Is that helpful?

Hugh Gordon: — Yeah. I was just wondering like maybe there doesn't need much analysis if some of the delays are associated only in particular causes you've mentioned.

Chad Boyko: — And I should have mentioned, as just a follow-up on what Ms. Murdoch is stating, that the majority of the appeals that are on hold with us are on hold pending a Court of Appeal decision because there'll be implications from that decision that should be applied. And that's based on the agreement of the parties.

Hugh Gordon: — Thank you.

Chair Wotherspoon: — MLA Pratchler.

Joan Pratchler: — Could you explain why the board did not previously report publicly on the assessment appeals? Or is it a decision or an oversight?

Chad Boyko: — I think it was reported annually. And as Ms. Murdoch said, we were reporting regularly to our stakeholders that were most impacted. I guess there was just maybe not enough thought given to publicly put it on our website, which certainly we are now doing. Yeah.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Any further questions? Not seeing any, so we have the five recommendations before us. We've heard the actions that have been taken to implement all five of them. I would welcome a motion to concur and note compliance with recommendations 1 through 5.

James Thorsteinson: — I so move.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Moved by Deputy Chair Thorsteinson. All agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

Chair Wotherspoon: — That's carried. Okay, well listen, I'd give Chair Boyko, Director Murdoch, thanks for your time here today. Thanks to all those as well that have been involved in the work that's reflected here today. Chair Boyko, do you have any final remarks for us before we shift gears?

Chad Boyko: — Just briefly I would state that beyond the numbers, the quantitative numbers that are reflected in the auditor's work, I think also that if there was a survey of our stakeholders — for example, SAMA, property agents, participants in our process — I think you would get some positive feedback on the qualitative nature of our decisions, the decision writing, I think.

We've heard from our stakeholders that that's improved over the number of years. We've put a lot of work into the quality of our decisions as well, so I think that's really the last comment I'd make.

Chair Wotherspoon: — That's great. Well, thanks for sharing that. Thanks for your time this morning. We'll briefly recess and bring before us the Ministry of Government Relations for the chapters that are focused on them.

[The committee recessed for a period of time.]

Government Relations

Chair Wotherspoon: — Okay, folks, we'll reconvene the Standing Committee on Public Accounts, and we're going to turn our attention to the Ministry of Government Relations. I'd like to welcome Deputy Minister Wilby for joining us here today along with an official. DM Wilby can briefly introduce your official. Refrain from getting into the chapter right now. We'll take it over to the auditor and then come back your way.

Drew Wilby: — Sounds good. Thank you, Mr. Chair. As you indicated, I'm Drew Wilby, deputy minister of Government Relations and deputy minister of First Nations, Métis and Northern Affairs. I have with me today ADM [assistant deputy minister] Dan French, who is our assistant deputy responsible for municipal relations in the province.

Chair Wotherspoon: — And coach of the U15 [under 15] Walleye.

Drew Wilby: — That's correct, sir. Yes.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Okay, I'm going to turn it over to the Provincial Auditor to present there on the chapter, and then we'll come back your way.

Tara Clemett: — Thank you. Mr. Chair, Deputy Chair, committee members, and officials, with me today is Mr. Trevor St. John, and he's the deputy provincial auditor that is responsible for the audits at Government Relations. Behind me as well is Ms. Michelle Lindenbach, and she's our liaison with the committee.

This presentation includes a status update on outstanding recommendations that the committee has previously agreed to, and we are pleased to see that all the outstanding recommendations are now fully addressed. I do want to thank the deputy minister and his staff for the co-operation that was extended to us during our work.

And with that I will flip it over to Trevor.

Trevor St. John: — Thanks. The Ministry of Government Relations is responsible for providing safe drinking water to Saskatchewan's northern settlements. The ministry owns and operates drinking water systems in five settlements and obtains water for two settlements through contracts with First Nations communities.

Chapter 13 of our 2026 report volume 1 reports the results of our fifth follow-up on the Ministry of Government Relations processes to provide safe drinking water to seven northern settlements. We originally made 10 recommendations in 2012, and by January 2024 eight had been implemented. By January 2026 the Ministry of Government Relations implemented the remaining two recommendations.

The ministry implemented the recommendation on page 173 where we recommended the ministry take prompt action to address problems in providing safe drinking water to northern settlements. As of February 2026 the Water Security Agency had rescinded the long-standing drinking water advisory for the northern settlement of Uranium City, and there were no emergency boil-water orders or precautionary drinking water advisories in place for the seven northern settlements. Taking corrective action to resolve drinking water quality issues is essential to ensure the safety of water consumed by northern settlement residents.

The ministry also implemented the recommendation on page 174 where we recommended the ministry consistently carry out all required maintenance for its water systems. The ministry uses various processes to supervise maintenance of the five ministry-

owned and -operated water systems as well as the two water systems operated by First Nations communities.

We found the ministry continued to contract a third-party infrastructure management consultant to review the maintenance records, advise on maintenance expectations, and supervise water systems for each water system. And since our last follow-up the ministry started tracking maintenance information in an IT system. We found 92 per cent of the required maintenance activities were completed.

Properly monitoring completion of maintenance reduces the risk that water quality and supply to northern settlements could be adversely affected.

I'll now pause for the committee's consideration.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Okay, thank you. Thanks very much for the presentation and the follow-up work on this front. This was originally presented in 2012, of course, as a chapter, considered by us in 2014. We've had follow-ups since then and some actions that have been taken. I'll kick it over to DM Wilby for brief remarks. Then we'll open it up for questions.

And I guess before we do that, maybe I'll just thank you for the status update, or your officials. And I'll table status update PAC 107-30, Ministry of Government Relations: Status update, dated October 13th, 2026. DM Wilby.

Drew Wilby: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. And thank you, committee, for having us here today. Obviously a big thanks to the auditor and her staff for the work that they do in helping us conduct our business and move through and holding us accountable as well for a lot of those pieces.

You know, firstly I would say these chapters have been on the books since 2012. That's far too long, but very happy that we've seen them fully implemented now and, you know, can present today on how that played out and where that went. A very important piece, providing that water up in our northern settlements.

And you know, as I became deputy minister of Government Relations, learning about how the northern Saskatchewan administration district works and the work of northern municipal services within the ministry and the interaction between the local First Nation communities, the settlements, as well as the incorporated towns, villages, and hamlets in the North as well, there's been quite a fascinating learning curve for me.

So you know, I'll open it up to any questions the committee may have obviously, and we look forward to providing responses accordingly.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Thank you. Open it up to committee members that may have questions. I see MLA Gordon.

Hugh Gordon: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. You've submitted that the water advisory in Uranium City, which was under an emergency boil water order since 2015, has been lifted due to the installation of the potable water bottle fill station. Can you describe the size and the application of that water fill station?

Drew Wilby: — Well certainly, and thanks for the question. I appreciate that. We're happy that that boil water advisory has been lifted, of course, and that there is that water available in Uranium City.

And Uranium City's a fascinating concept that you've got. It's a community that was really built for 50,000 that now has about 50 people in it, and so some interesting infrastructure pieces. And I was talking to our executive director up there this morning, who had a true Saskatchewan experience where a bear attacked his garbage. So he was a little bit late getting to our briefing but thought that was, you know, sort of perfect and par for the course.

[11:00]

He says the system that's in place there — that was in place — was actually a clay tile-based system. As well it's got iron piping, and so you can imagine the holes and also the clay tile and how that can basically fall apart and not function. And so, you know, a lot of decisions were conducted to figure out what a cost-effective alternative was to a full rebuild of that system.

And so what they've moved to is a distribution piece where it's a smaller bottle fill station in essence. And so when I asked him to describe it, I said, so when I go to my local Co-op and I take my five-gallon jug, is that in essence what's set up? He said, yeah, basically in short that's where it is, or if I'm out at the lake and I head into Miller's in Riverhurst to fill my jug so I've got portable water.

And so the water continues to flow for hygienic purposes to those areas of Uranium City where it's required. They've shut it off to the other areas, but that bottle fill station is available to those members of the community that live there and give them a clean drinking water source.

From there obviously we have technicians that go up and take a look to make sure that it's functioning appropriately, to make sure that the proper testing is done on that, that are under the authority of our public works manager that works for northern municipal services out of La Ronge.

Hugh Gordon: — Just as a follow-up on that water fill station, I was wondering if you could tell us what the expected usage of that station is. How much traffic do you expect the fill station to handle?

Drew Wilby: — Yeah, great question. I mean obviously with about 50 members of the community right now, we believe it's equipped to deal with that on an ongoing basis. You know, we continue to look at the proper maintenance on it and what that may do. It is in a fully weather sustainable — well that's tough to say for Saskatchewan — but at this point in time, weather sustainable shop that's there. So it's insulated, one of the few buildings that we do have that we're able to provide that in. So again it's able to be looked after in that way. It does fill the equivalent of a five-gallon jug at any given time. And of course you can fill multiples as well.

So we believe that it is in place to deal with the load that the community currently would put on it. I would love to say, you know, if the community was to grow we would be able to accommodate that, although I'm not sure Uranium City is

growing at this point in time. But we'll see what happens down the road and just make sure that we're adjusting accordingly as we need to.

Hugh Gordon: — So on that point then, you feel like there's adequate water in that capacity to meet the needs of these 50 community members?

Drew Wilby: — At this point in time, yes, I'm confident saying that.

Hugh Gordon: — What's the maintenance cycle for a fill station like this?

Drew Wilby: — So the maintenance cycle, we would look at that at least twice a year, if not more often, to be able to go through and make sure that all the checks and balances are on that.

In terms of an official breakdown of what the maintenance cycle is, I don't have that on me at this point in time, Member, but if I could provide that to you, I'd be happy to bring that back to the committee and lay out what that is. I'd like to vet it through the experts before I go off cuff and say something that I probably shouldn't, if that's all right.

Hugh Gordon: — No, I appreciate that. And you know, we'd be happy to accommodate, give you adequate time to provide that at a later date. That'd be good. I don't know if you could include in that some answer to my next question, which is the cost associated to the maintenance of this water fill station.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Maybe I'll just stop you there, MLA Gordon.

Hugh Gordon: — Yeah.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Thanks for that and the undertaking as well to get the information back. Is it reasonable to supply that information to those questions that were posed within a month's time to this committee?

Drew Wilby: — Not a problem, Mr. Chair. You know, and just on the cost piece if I could, you know, in terms of what the cost of the maintenance is, the replacement for the waterworks out there would have been about \$10 million. So we believe that this was a good cost-effective alternative. And I'll bring back those costs accordingly for the maintenance cycle and what that looks like.

Hugh Gordon: — Fair enough. So, sorry, did I understand that system costs about 10 million?

Drew Wilby: — That would have been the full replacement if we were to replace the waterworks that's currently in place.

Hugh Gordon: — Right.

Drew Wilby: — So in terms of the bottle fill, it's much cheaper than that as a cost-effective alternative that continues to provide drinking water as well as the hygienic purposes as well.

Hugh Gordon: — Right. Were there any other recommendations other than the water fill station and complete replacement to

address this issue?

Drew Wilby: — At this point it was to provide that drinking water into Uranium City, which of course we have now done, so we believe that that's implemented the chapter as a whole.

Hugh Gordon: — I guess, sorry, let me clarify. Were there any other options that were considered other than the water fill station?

Drew Wilby: — I understand. Sorry about that. We did look at minimizing the size of the system to any of those that were living there, which we did on the hygienic side, and just determined that the amount of chlorine that would be needed in order to, you know, continue to make that potable as well, the work with those clay tiles and that iron system wouldn't make sense to do the upkeep on it to bring that back to a potable standard. They did look at a variety of different options and settled on the bottle fill station as being the most cost-effective option that got water into the community and made sure that there was that drinking water source available for those residents there.

Hugh Gordon: — Thank you.

Chair Wotherspoon: — MLA Pratchler.

Joan Pratchler: — So I understand that this is a singular station. What's the backup plan if it fails?

Drew Wilby: — Their backup plan if it fails obviously would have, you know, a tech be able to travel into the area to look after that and make sure that it was back up and running. And we would look to commit to doing that, I mean, as quickly as we possibly could.

In terms of sort of a business continuity model to make sure that there's water there, there's a variety of options, you know — sending water up into the community for a short gap until we're able to fix that, as well as other options. But we're confident in the system that's there and its ability to continue to operate.

Joan Pratchler: — Backup is really important even for an interim. If it went down today, how long would it take for them to get water?

Drew Wilby: — In terms of the system as it is, it would be dependent upon getting the tech there and whatever maintenance might need to be provided on that system. In terms of getting water into the community, I mean it would be the availability of moving that via, you know, however we're going to move that — likely by plane — into the area.

You know, in terms of that full continuity plan and backup, again, I could commit to bringing that back to the committee and what that looks like. But I know the work of northern municipal services, that's something they do on an ongoing basis to make sure that those pieces are in place.

Joan Pratchler: — I think that's really important. If you could provide that, that would be great. So do I understand they have drinking water, and they have what we would call hygienic water? So they have both of those comes from that one spot? Or can you clarify? I'm not quite sure on that picture.

Drew Wilby: — No, absolutely. The hygienic water — so that would be used for bathing, showering, and those purposes — comes from the original waterworks that's in the community. And so it's transported through a piping system from the waterworks to the houses. And then from there, obviously because that's not consumable from a potable perspective, we have a shop system that's in a similar location to the initial waterworks that houses the bottle fill station for the local residents.

Joan Pratchler: — And now the priority, you know, when an emergency happens, would be to have potable water. What's the backup for the hygienic water?

Drew Wilby: — For the hygienic water, I mean obviously we would go up and look and try and fix that system. In terms of an immediate backup, because of the remote location of Uranium City, it's difficult, obviously, to get an immediate backup system in place. I mean in Regina if it occurs, obviously we'll take up trailers of water — not take up, but take out to a local neighbourhood — which of course we don't want to have happen, but sometimes happens. And so we would look at those options as well for the community that's there.

As part of that report back I can also check to see if there's been history of that, and if we do have some examples, you know, what the length of that was and how that looks.

Joan Pratchler: — Yeah, I think that's really important because of the situation. The backup, having it ready to go when water's out, is important regardless of whether it's in urban or remote.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Just a question on that system that you have there, just for understanding. So are you pulling that, then, just from the watershed, from the lake and then treating it? Or is that a well system, or what's going on there?

Dan French: — Hi. Dan French, ADM for municipal relations. It's our understanding it's a well system. But to Drew's point earlier, it wasn't feasible to rebuild it as is. So that's where the potable water filling station came about, but the well system is still being used for non-potable.

Chair Wotherspoon: — And the well itself is then treated and that supplies the potable water? Is that how that system works?

Dan French: — I couldn't confirm that at this moment. We'll have to add that to the list as well.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Sure. Thanks. I'll kick it back over to MLA Pratchler. MLA Gordon.

Hugh Gordon: — Sorry, I have to wait for the Chair to get permission. Sorry, I'm a little eager, Mr. Chair.

In reference to the recommendation on page 174 regarding the necessity of seamless and continuous maintenance by the ministry of all water systems it's responsible for, what exactly have you changed in your practices since this recommendation was made?

Drew Wilby: — We have a public works manager hired within northern municipal services. That public works manager used to

work for the city of Saskatoon, so obviously fully trained on water operation systems and certifications and the such. Outside of that we do have some staff that are able to go and able to provide that maintenance as well, as well as the certification and making sure that things are up and running.

We do have contracts with local First Nations in places too, where there may be a shared service model or the local First Nation may have a certified operator that's employed, and we're able to utilize that and contract their services.

And then we also have third party too. We have third-party service delivery where we can go and we can contract with them to look at those, again the certifications and the maintenance piece, and make sure that they're intact.

Hugh Gordon: — Go ahead.

Chair Wotherspoon: — MLA Pratchler.

Joan Pratchler: — I see on page 172 that the Ministry of Government Relations . . . or pardon me, five ministry-owned water systems. How long has the ministry been responsible for these systems?

Dan French: — Yeah. We don't have those answers right now, but we can certainly . . . Like our executive director has been there since 2012, the year this audit started, and so those systems have been there prior to that.

Joan Pratchler: — Just in follow-up, if the ministry has been responsible for those systems that long, why did it take an auditor's report and recommendation to incite change in the way the systems are looked at?

Drew Wilby: — I believe, you know, that work is constantly ongoing in terms of looking at the systems and how they operate, making sure those certifications are in place. That system we referenced from Uranium City was originally put in the ground in the 1950s, and so, you know, operating that on a continuous basis with the technology that was there in the 1950s compared to where we are now. You know, it's safe to say the ministry has looked at the operations. It's not just all of sudden in 2012 that this was brought to light.

But I would say that this is the strength of working with the auditor. When they come in, they take a different lens. They take a different look and ensure that there's that accountability there, which we really appreciate from our perspective, and so being able to work with the recommendations and move through that. And it helps us . . . I don't want to use the word "business" because providing water isn't business, but it helps us with the work that we do, ensuring that we're on, you know, the appropriate track and that things that maybe we aren't looking at are brought to light. And again why we're here today, that public accountability piece for some of our northern residents is very, very important.

So I wouldn't say that the ministry hasn't looked at it at all since some of those works were put in the ground in the 1950s and 1960s. But again it just sheds a different light and provides that higher level of accountability that I think is important for the people of northern Saskatchewan, the taxpayers of the province.

Joan Pratchler: — It's true. Many of our team have been up north over the past summer, and water is just one of many, many challenges. So that's why we . . . Priority. Thanks.

Chair Wotherspoon: — MLA Gordon.

Hugh Gordon: — In the case of Bear Creek and Brabant Lake, has there been any discussion on changing the practice of trucking water in to the residents' homes to a more modern delivery system?

Dan French: — Yeah. So for Bear Creek, repairs were made to the community well in 2021, and the water and sewer system currently is being assessed now. There are many projects either in the design phase or the concept phase — and one of them is Bear Creek — about determining what the future and the improvements that are required for Bear Creek.

Hugh Gordon: — And Brabant Lake?

Dan French: — Sorry?

Hugh Gordon: — And the same for Brabant Lake?

Dan French: — Yes. So yeah, in 2022 wells were drilled. In 2023 the control systems in the treatment plants were upgraded. And again a new water system assessment is currently being planned through municipal northern services.

Hugh Gordon: — Do you have a diary date for those systems once they've been . . . when they'll be completed?

Dan French: — Well the systems . . . No, we don't. No, we don't. We have kind of an outline of funding, but we have no specific dates at this moment.

Hugh Gordon: — Fair enough. Can you share with the committee today what's the cost to the people of Bear Lake to have their water trucked in to their homes by the ministry, versus Brabant Lake's residents who, according to a report, are made to hire a private company to provide the same service your ministry provides to Bear Creek?

Drew Wilby: — So I think what's important to note with those northern settlements is that the governance structure for them falls to northern municipal services, which is the ministry operation. And so those costs will be borne through the Northern Municipal Trust Account as well as through the work of northern municipal services.

[11:15]

Obviously when we look at these pieces, we're looking for, you know, that safe provision in a cost-effective means that makes sense across the board. So in terms again of the cost that's being borne, that's being borne out of the northern municipal services budget.

Hugh Gordon: — Okay, thank you.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Any further questions for folks? Not seeing any at this time. Thanks for the action taken to implement this recommendation and for the time here today. I'd welcome a

motion to conclude consideration of chapter 13.

James Thorsteinson: — I so move.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Moved by Deputy Chair Thorsteinson. All agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

Chair Wotherspoon: — That's carried. Thanks again to you both as officials for being here and all those involved in this important work. DM Wilby, do you have any final remarks for us before we send you packing?

Drew Wilby: — You know, I would just say thank you to the auditor again. Thank you to the committee for the great questions and for the structure here today. And just thanks to those hard-working folks in La Ronge and our northern municipal services shop. They're doing this work. You know, being up in La Ronge this summer and seeing the work they do, it's pretty impressive, canvassing everything north of the northern Saskatchewan administration district line.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Thank you very much, and thanks to those all that are involved in this work. Thanks for your time here today. And we'll take a brief recess as a committee before we bring before us the Public Service Commission.

[The committee recessed for a period of time.]

Public Service Commission

Chair Wotherspoon: — Okay, good morning. We'll reconvene the Standing Committee on Public Accounts and turn our attention to the Public Service Commission and chapter 11 that the auditor has focused on.

I'd like to introduce and welcome all the officials that have joined us here today, Chair Csada that's joined us along with her officials and her team. I'd invite her to briefly introduce the officials that have joined her here today, and then I'll refrain from getting into the chapter right now. I'll go over to the auditor and then come back your way for that.

Brittany Csada: — Okay, sure. Good morning. Thank you. Appearing with me today on behalf of the Public Service Commission we have Claudia Burke, assistant Chair; Amanda Mullan, executive director of our talent branch; and Kendra LaHaye, executive director of the employee well-being and inclusion area. Thank you.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Okay, excellent. I'm going to turn it over to the Provincial Auditor to make their presentation.

Tara Clemett: — So thank you, Mr. Chair, Deputy Chair, committee members, and officials. With me today is Mr. Trevor St. John, and he's the deputy provincial auditor that is responsible for the audits at the Public Service Commission. This presentation includes a status update on outstanding recommendations that this committee has previously agreed to. I do want to thank the Chair and her staff for the co-operation that was extended to us during our work. With that, I'll turn it over to Trevor.

Trevor St. John: — Thank you. The Public Service Commission is responsible for working with ministries on workplace, workforce management, and supporting the delivery of services such as payroll; staffing and classification; and strategic support, including labour relations and organizational development. The commission also works with ministries to support workplace diversity and inclusion. In 2023-24 the commission had 289 full-time equivalent positions in Regina and Saskatoon, with a total budget of 34 million.

Chapter 11 of our 2025 report volume 1 reports the results of our first follow-up on Public Service Commission's processes to advance workplace diversity and inclusion in ministries. We made six recommendations in 2022. By November 2024 the Public Service Commission implemented one of the six recommendations.

The commission implemented the recommendation on page 137, where we recommended the commission modernize the employment equity policy to align with good practice. The revised policy, now called the employment equity, diversity, and inclusion policy, includes a section for key definitions and sets out clear roles and responsibilities for the commission as well as ministries.

Research on good practice and consultation with a variety of interested parties appropriately informed the key definitions. The commission utilized the corporate inclusion community of practice, which meets six times a year, to educate ministries on the updated policy.

The commission did not implement the recommendation on page 138, where we recommended the commission set clear indicators for measuring progress in a time frame for its inclusion strategy. The commission last updated its inclusion strategy in 2021, which lacked clear indicators and targets for measuring success related to key diversity and inclusion goals and objectives, like employee satisfaction scores by designated groups or the number of self-declarations from new hires. The commission expected to update its inclusion strategy during 2025-26.

The absence of clear indicators for measuring progress of key diversity and inclusion strategies can make it difficult to hold the commission and ministries accountable for results and increases the risk that strategies may not be working as intended.

The commission partially implemented the recommendation on page 139, where we recommended the commission expand its inclusion tool kit to embed diversity and inclusion concepts consistent with good practice. The commission made some amendments to its inclusion tool kit between September 2022 and November 2024. The inclusion tool kit is intended to support ministry managers with embedding diversity and inclusion in their workplaces.

However the commission had yet to update its inclusion tool kit to align with the definition it now uses in its updated employment equity, diversity, and inclusion policy previously mentioned. Also it had yet to expand other key areas of the tool kit we expected in our 2022 audit, such as additional Indigenous-related content, content on accessibility and neurodiversity, and case studies on bias. Without sufficient content in its inclusion tool kit, ministries may be less likely to achieve key diversity and

inclusion goals and initiatives.

The commission partially implemented the recommendation on page 140, where we recommended the commission monitor ministry diversity and inclusion plans and progress reports to help ministries increase diversity and inclusion in their workplaces. The corporate inclusion community of practice provides direction and a community for all 18 ministries to learn and share tools, practices, ideas, and resources related to inclusion.

The number of annual diversity and inclusion plans received by the commission from the ministries did increase from four in 2023-24 to six in 2024-25. However the commission had yet to receive a diversity inclusion plan as of November 2024 from the majority, or 67 per cent, of the ministries it oversees.

We found the commission also continued to lack a structured process to collect and assess any progress reports or to provide formal feedback to ministries. The commission gave no formal feedback to the ministries that provided diversity and inclusion plans. The commission had yet to establish formal guidance, for example a template, for the annual ministry diversity and inclusion plans.

We assessed each of the plans received by the commission during the year and found they lacked consistency. Without a consistent method or process to analyze ministry diversity and inclusion plans and reports, the commission cannot sufficiently monitor the effectiveness of diversity and inclusion initiatives across ministries and may not identify or offer sufficient support to ministries where challenges appear to exist.

The commission did not implement the two recommendations on page 141, where we recommended the commission sufficiently analyze diversity and inclusion data to identify and address risks that may prevent ministries from achieving cross-ministerial diversity and inclusion goals, and to implement a written policy for reporting diversity and inclusion results to its senior management and to the public to demonstrate accountability and commitment for workplace diversity and inclusion.

The commission was waiting on the development of the new payroll and HR [human resources] system for a more robust process to analyze diversity data. As a result, the commission performed limited analysis each year related to diversity and inclusion data consistent with our original audit findings.

At November 2024 the commission continued to use employee data to obtain the percentage of ministry employees who self-declared as Indigenous, persons with disabilities, members of visible minorities, or women in middle or senior management. We found it consistently provided semi-annual reports on these statistics to the commission senior management. For the first time, the commission's '23-24 public annual report included the five-year trend.

[11:30]

The commission's internal analysis and reporting still did not routinely analyze hiring or retention rates of designated groups or use exit interviews to gather additional information that may indicate issues.

The commission's annual report did not provide any targets for the public to determine whether the commission was successful in achieving its diversity and inclusion goals. Good practice suggests the commission should publicly report meaningful indicators for diversity and inclusion goals such as progress towards Saskatchewan Human Rights Commission targets and trends in retention and survey satisfaction results of employees belonging to designated groups compared to all employees. Having, analyzing, and reporting progress towards specific targets helps provide clear expectations and direction, and enables appropriate assessment of progress.

I'll now pause for the committee's consideration.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Okay, thanks very much for the presentation, the follow-up on this front. This all stems from the 2022 report of course, and we've had this considered and heard before our committee before. I'll kick it over to Chair Csada in a moment here.

I'll table at this point PAC 108-30, Public Service Commission, Status update, dated October 13th, 2026. And thank you to you and your officials, all those that were involved in the work reflected in that status update.

Chair Csada, feel free to provide some brief remarks and then we'll open it up to the committee for questions.

Brittany Csada: — Thank you. The Public Service Commission appreciates the work of the Provincial Auditor and we particularly value the collaborative working relationship that we have with the auditor's office throughout the process. The recommendations have helped guide our efforts and strengthen how we support ministries in building representative and inclusive workplaces across government.

Since the follow-up audit, our focus has been on strengthening the foundations needed for long-term success. One of the most significant advancements has been the implementation of the GEM [government enterprise management] system. This system now provides senior leaders with expanded workforce data and reporting capabilities. These enhancements will provide leaders with greater visibility into representation across diversity groups, strengthen our ability to identify opportunities, and measure progress.

I'll now share some of the progress made towards the recommendations. Regarding the recommendation to set clear indicators for measuring progress and a time frame for the inclusion strategy, this recommendation is partially implemented. Since the follow-up audit in November of 2025, we transitioned from an annual inclusion action plan to a three-year inclusion action plan with annual review and enhanced measures of progress.

The inclusion action plan, which is guided by the inclusion strategy, sets a framework to outline the priorities for the Public Service Commission and for ministries across government. The plan focuses on four themes including inspiring accountability at all levels; improving intercultural competence through awareness, education, and training; enhancing talent attraction processes and tools; and creating an inclusive and supportive workplace for all employees.

Within each theme, the plan establishes clear goals, timelines, and measures to support implementation and monitor progress. This approach provides greater consistency and accountability while ensuring that priorities remain aligned with the evolving needs of the public service.

On June 1st of 2026 the GEM system was implemented, providing enhanced access to workforce indicators, including self-declaration, hiring, promotion, and separation information. These enhancements represent a significant step forward in our ability to understand workforce trends and measure progress. As we are in the early stages of GEM implementation and learning to use the new system, we will continue building capacity and refining reporting approaches for measuring progress, and we anticipate full implementation by the end of the fiscal year. In addition, we are planning for review of the inclusion strategy in the 2027-28 fiscal year.

Regarding the recommendation that the Public Service Commission expand its inclusion tool kit to embed diversity and inclusion concepts consistent with good practice, we consider this recommendation partially implemented. We continue to enhance the inclusion tool kit to provide employees and leaders with practical resources that support inclusive workplace practices. Throughout 2025-26, the tool kit was updated to refresh existing content, improve functionality, and expand content in alignment with the recommendations. Additional content will be added to the tool kit, and we anticipate full implementation of this recommendation by the end of the fiscal year.

Regarding the recommendation that the Public Service Commission monitor ministry diversity and inclusion plans and progress reports, we consider this recommendation implemented.

In '25-26 a standardized inclusion plan template was developed and shared with ministries alongside the new three-year inclusion action plan. The template was designed to support a more consistent and strategic approach to inclusion planning across government while encouraging ministries to identify priorities, actions, and measures that reflect their unique workforce needs.

The shift to a three-year planning cycle also provides ministries with greater opportunity to focus on longer term outcomes, monitor progress over time, and align inclusion efforts with broader workforce goals. To date, 13 ministries have submitted inclusion plans, with several others actively developing their plans. This represents a significant increase in engagement and demonstrates a growing commitment across government to advancing inclusion in ministries.

Ministry inclusion representatives continue to be supported through the inclusion community of practice, which continues to serve as a forum for collaboration, knowledge, and information sharing. Through this network, participants share their action plans and have access to consultation, feedback, and resources that help strengthen inclusion action planning and implementation.

Regarding the recommendation that the Public Service Commission sufficiently analyze diversity and inclusion data to identify and address risks that may prevent ministries from achieving cross-ministerial diversity and inclusion goals, we

consider this recommendation to be partially implemented.

As previously noted, we now have enhanced workforce data and reporting capabilities available in GEM. The system provides the commission and ministry leaders with a more comprehensive view of workforce trends and strengthens the ability to monitor progress.

In addition to workforce data analysis, data from the engagement and culture survey is analyzed through an inclusion lens to identify themes and trends related to workplace culture and inclusion. Findings are shared with the inclusion community of practice to support awareness and discussion.

Regarding the recommendation that the Public Service Commission implement a written policy for reporting diversity and inclusion results to its senior management and to the public to demonstrate accountability and commitment for workforce diversity and inclusion, this recommendation is considered implemented.

The commission continues to report this information through established internal reporting mechanisms. Senior leaders have access to workforce data within the GEM system available to them at any time through enhanced dashboards and reporting tools. We continue to report publicly through the annual reporting process.

In 2024 the commission updated its diversity and inclusion policy, a recommendation noted as implemented by the Provincial Auditor in the follow-up audit. The policy establishes clear responsibilities regarding the commission's role in providing oversight, guidance, and support to ministries. We believe this policy broadly addresses the intent of the recommendation by establishing accountability for measuring and reporting progress while supporting a coordinated approach to inclusion across government.

The policy provides overall direction and oversight but does not set detailed reporting requirements or procedures. These are addressed through business processes, reporting tools, and operational guidance that can be updated as organizational needs change.

Taken together, the updated policy, enhanced analytics available through GEM, and established reporting process to senior leaders and the public provide a strong foundation for monitoring, reporting, and supporting representative workforce initiatives across the public service. For these reasons we consider this recommendation to be addressed through both policy direction and operational practice.

Overall the work completed to date has strengthened the foundation for a more representative and inclusive public service. Since the original audit, we have made meaningful progress in establishing the tools, processes, and governance needed to support long-term success. The implementation of GEM, the introduction of a three-year inclusion action plan, enhanced resources, and continued collaboration with ministries have all contributed to a more coordinated and informed approach.

As we move forward, our focus will be on maximizing the value of the GEM system by building capacity, increasing self-

declaration participation, and using workforce data to better understand trends and identify opportunities. We will continue to support ministries through the diversity networks and inclusion community of practice; expand resources available through the inclusion tool kit; advance accessibility initiatives; and strengthen recruitment, retention, and inclusion efforts.

The Public Service Commission remains committed to providing leadership, guidance, and support to help build a public service that reflects the people of Saskatchewan.

Thank you, and we'd be pleased to answer any questions.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Well thank you very much, Chair Csada. I'll open it up now to committee members that may have questions. MLA Pratchler.

Joan Pratchler: — Thank you and welcome. At the outset, can you list some of the organizations or list the organizations you consulted to, you know, to inform your strategies and when you consulted them?

Brittany Csada: — I'll speak a bit to our approach to updating the policy. So the policy was informed through best-practice research and that included information available through the Canadian Centre for Diversity and Inclusion and consultation with stakeholders including the Human Rights Commission, the inclusion community of practice that I referenced earlier, employee diversity networks such as the Saskatchewan visible minority association, as well as internal Public Service Commission business areas.

Joan Pratchler: — Thank you. Was the Saskatchewan Human Rights Commission consulted before or after the Minister of Justice had replaced every commissioner in 2024?

Brittany Csada: — I don't have the exact timing but the consultations did occur prior to 2024 as the updates were made in 2024.

Joan Pratchler: — And what input in terms of criteria did the Human Rights Commission add?

Brittany Csada: — So I don't have all the feedback that they provided with us today, but generally they would have been provided with the policy, and they typically provided recommendations, advice, and guidance related to language and terminology, pieces like that.

Joan Pratchler: — Would you be able to provide that to the committee if we gave you a reasonable amount of time, like a month or something?

Brittany Csada: — We could take that under consideration.

Chair Wotherspoon: — MLA Gordon.

Hugh Gordon: — The question I'm going to ask is something maybe you could table at a later date with some numbers. If you could table the number of employees self-identifying as a member of each designated group — as mentioned on page 136 of the report — in each of the last five years, the proportion of the workforce they represent, and how that breaks down by

ministry. Would that be possible to table at a future date?

Brittany Csada: — Yes.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Thanks for that undertaking to provide that information. So the standard process would be to then supply that through the Clerk, and the Clerk will provide that information to you. Is one month a reasonable time frame to get that information to us?

Brittany Csada: — Yes.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Right on. Thank you.

Brittany Csada: — The one piece I'll add just for context around that, so our reporting is based on self-declaration information. And with the transition to our new system we weren't able to migrate all of the legacy data as it relates to self-declaration, so there will be a bit of a difference in numbers from last year to this year. So just a bit of context around that information.

Chair Wotherspoon: — MLA Pratchler.

Joan Pratchler: — Just to clarify that you would consider, but would you furnish to the committee information that the Human Rights Commission added?

Brittany Csada: — Like recommendations they provided?

Joan Pratchler: — Yes.

Brittany Csada: — Yeah. We can check and see what we have, yeah.

Joan Pratchler: — Could you give us a better idea of the good practice you're aiming for, particularly for gender transition guidelines?

[11:45]

Kendra LaHaye: — Hi there. I am Kendra LaHaye, executive director with the employee well-being and inclusion unit. So the gender transition guidelines were developed prior to the 2022 audit, I believe, in consultation with the Pride Alliance Network. So they were heavily involved in the update and really a key contributor. The guidelines are available on the inclusion tool kit. They're intended to support managers and employees, of course supported by consultation through the commission, whether business partners or our office, to apply those. They really focus around empowering employees, privacy, confidentiality.

Joan Pratchler: — Okay.

Chair Wotherspoon: — MLA Gordon.

Hugh Gordon: — What oversight are you carrying out to confirm ministries are actually following their inclusion action plans?

Brittany Csada: — So the inclusion community of practice is the forum we have that ministries share their inclusion plans and the actions that we're working towards. And so that's the avenue where they would share kind of the actions undertaken and use

that community of practice body to gather feedback, share ideas, best practices, that sort of thing.

Hugh Gordon: — So just to be clear, like some of these early-adopting ministries, they're using this action plan template. They're not relying on a prior process to adhere to the inclusion plans you have. Is that right?

Kendra LaHaye: — So we update our inclusion action plan annually and we share that. So it's a three-year plan, but we revisit it annually with the community of practice to answer questions around, is it aligning. It's really intended to be broad. Each ministry is really unique. It's that balance of what are our common goals and objectives, and how do we also make space for ministry-specific priorities and their workforce needs.

So they provide updates on that. Through the community of practice certainly those early adopters have added a lot of value in sharing what's worked for them, what are some of their best practices, so that other ministries could adopt and learn from those and ensure that it fits within their overall plan as well.

Brittany Csada: — And I would just add to that, the standardized template was something that was added based on a recommendation from the Provincial Auditor, and all ministries would have access to that standardized template as the mechanism for completing.

Chair Wotherspoon: — MLA Pratchler.

Joan Pratchler: — Could you tell us what risk factors you've identified that are preventing ministries from achieving diversity and inclusion goals? And are any of those ministry specific, or are these across all government?

Brittany Csada: — So the challenges we would typically see, I think they'd be a bit different for each ministry based on, you know, operational practice. There would be some common ones; some might be unique. But kind of the themes around challenges would be education and awareness, recruitment practices, and the tools available to support.

And so, you know, we as a commission will continue to support ministries through the diversity networks, through the inclusion community of practice, through the expanded resources that we've talked about in our policy and tool kits, as well as strengthened recruitment, retention, and inclusion efforts.

Chair Wotherspoon: — MLA Gordon.

Hugh Gordon: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. How many ministries are currently meeting inclusion targets? I know there was some discussion that there weren't. Maybe you can clarify what those targets might be if they exist. But how many ministries are currently meeting those targets across all categories and overall?

Brittany Csada: — So I don't have the breakdown today of ministry-by-ministry targets, but we do seek to align to the Sask Human Rights Commission recommended targets.

I'll share a little bit about some of the pieces that are in ministry inclusion plans just to give you a sense. Common actions we would see include communication and awareness campaigns,

employee learning opportunities, activities to promote understanding inclusion and engagement in workplaces. You might see things like speaker sessions; cultural awareness events that have an educational component such as smudge ceremonies or blanket exercises, just to name a few; as well as recognition of commemorative dates. That's some of the actions that are in those plans.

Hugh Gordon: — Just as a follow-up, I think that's why the targets are really important, because how are you able to keep track of your progress, like how do you know? And I may come back to it about how GEM may assist you in that regard. But I guess unless you've set targets and you're holding ministries to account to meet those targets, it's very difficult, from what I understand, for you to actually tell the committee what progress you've made in these areas. Correct?

Brittany Csada: — Yeah, I think that's where the GEM system will provide that enhanced reporting, along with, you know, our efforts to increase self-declaration through communication. That's a really important aspect as well. Those two things combined will give us access to more robust data.

Chair Wotherspoon: — MLA Pratchler.

Joan Pratchler: — How many diversity groups within the workforce did you meet with to help informed, lived experience in your best-practice targets?

Kendra LaHaye: — So we frequently consult with our employee diversity networks. And so we have four networks across government: the disAbility Inclusion Network, the Indigenous Employee Network, Saskatchewan Visible Minority Employees Association, and our Pride Alliance Network.

In addition we have our Senior Indigenous Advisors Council, which provide government-wide representation. And so consultation with that group, as well as PSC [Public Service Commission], has a senior Indigenous advisor that will provide more input on a day-to-day basis across all programs and services as well. So really rely on that consultation and then also engage with areas across PSC business partner teams around what they're also hearing from ministry clients.

Joan Pratchler: — Thank you. When I look at the recommendation on page 138, could you explain to me the rationale and the efficacy of going from a one-year plan to a three-year plan and suggesting that that's better?

Kendra LaHaye: — When it comes to diversity and inclusion, of course it takes sustained commitment and action and activity. So we found that within one year, for ministries to set a target or set their actions, implement, and evaluate progress, we'd be back in a planning phase again. Over a three-year period ... [inaudible] ... for longer term actions, short-, medium-term actions, and more time to be thoughtful about those plans, implement them, and take meaningful action.

Joan Pratchler: — Well couldn't that be divided yearly to provide more transparency to the people of Saskatchewan?

Kendra LaHaye: — I think we were in a yearly planning process and just felt the time for them to implement that and take action,

sustained across all of their, you know, program areas . . . Certainly we do a one-year check-in every year. So every year we come back to the inclusion community of practice to say . . . We provide a one-year progress report around the commitments PSC has, share that out, invite feedback, and sort of adjust as we go.

[12:00]

Joan Pratchler: — And just layering that over the recommendation that's on page 141, the auditor suggests that the policy should or that it needs to have more specificity. And the response from the group was that it's to broadly capture the recommendation.

And I guess I'm piggybacking on what my colleague says: why not the specificity of having targets and, you know, make them reasonable and review them for continuous improvement rather than having them spread out over three years? It almost . . . or the sense that I'm seeing is that the targets don't matter, but we think they do and I think the people of Saskatchewan think they do. So I need to understand why the specificity on the targets aren't there and why we would not go to specifics and really want to capture it broadly.

Kendra LaHaye: — So thank you for that comment. I will just clarify that we do measure against the Saskatchewan human rights targets. So we don't set different targets from there. We trust their expertise and the work that they do to set those. So we do measure against those representation numbers.

Now in GEM we now have access to hires, separations, promotions. Prior, we really relied on representation information provided through self-declaration. So that's really some of the work that's under way is what's available to us now, how are we using that to set up sort of whatever those measures might be, what the reporting process looks like. So in the past measured against Sask human rights recommended targets, continue to do that, and looking forward to the enhanced measures that we'll now have through GEM.

Here your other comment in terms of some of those inclusion action plans are more qualitative, right. And then these are around the measures around that representation information.

Joan Pratchler: — So how are the ministries held to account for their targets?

Brittany Csada: — So the role of the Public Service Commission is really to work collaboratively with ministries to provide the guidance, the tools, the templates, the centralized policy support to assist with the development of those plans. So you know, we don't necessarily have the authority to mandate certain targets or things to them. However I would say each ministry's permanent head oversees the activities related to inclusion and diversity and provides, you know, support, guidance, and direction to their specific ministries.

Joan Pratchler: — So it is upon each ministry to ensure that their targets are met, and that's the oversight that's provided for each ministry?

Brittany Csada: — Yeah, again aligning to those Sask Human

Rights Commission targets. All of government aligns to those. But each ministry has their own accountability to set forward what their ministry-specific actions are going to be related to their inclusion plans.

Joan Pratchler: — Okay. So it is the oversight of the auditor that would ensure that they would comply?

Brittany Csada: — I'm not sure . . . Sorry, can you repeat?

Joan Pratchler: — So no one oversees all the ministries together? It's really only when the auditor does a report and finds out that it's not happening that it's not happening?

Brittany Csada: — Again it's through that inclusion community of practice. That is the sharing forum where ministries bring forward their actions and their progress. And in terms of reporting on the targets, that's the broader government-wide data that's available in the system. So it's kind of two parts. The data, the PSC does have that data piece through the system. But in terms of the ministry-specific actions in their inclusion plans, they would share those with the broader community of practice, so that becomes that body to share.

Joan Pratchler: — And so does that community of practice help them reach their targets? Or is it that they're accountable to that committee then?

Brittany Csada: — I think the role of the committee is to provide, you know, feedback. It's a place to share ideas. So in some ways they might help, share what's worked for them. And so part of that group, they might share ideas and take practices. What's worked in one ministry may work and help support in another ministry. So there is that mechanism of support at that committee.

Joan Pratchler: — And so it's just public opinion whether the targets are being met? Or like what I'm wrestling with is, where's the accountability to ensure that these targets are being met? And what would be the consequence if they're not? How do we move that forward? Because typically what's measured gets it done. And I'm not sure. Maybe I'm just not getting all the, you know, ducks in a row for this one.

Brittany Csada: — Yeah, I think that public reporting comes through the annual report, the PSC report on government-wide trends and metrics related to designated groups. The PSC holds that reporting piece for all of government, but ministry-specific actions, they report on those to the committee themselves.

Joan Pratchler: — Thank you.

Chair Wotherspoon: — MLA Gordon.

Hugh Gordon: — Speaking of data, I imagine GEM is going to assist you in acquiring more detailed information about, you know, the diversity and equity in the workplace. I'm wondering what work will you be undertaking once perhaps GEM's been utilized for a certain period of time to analyze that data? What are your actions? What actions will you take to analyze that data?

Brittany Csada: — I think the first step for us will be really understanding what data's available and what it looks like from

a reporting perspective in GEM. So we're in early days since implementation, so we now know the system has that enhanced functionality. We need to figure out what it looks like from a reporting perspective. So I think that's step one, is to make sure that we have that good data.

We talked a bit about the importance of self-declaration. We'll be doing some communication around the importance to promote that. That's an important part of having good data. And then from there I think we'll be able to take a look at what's possible, based on the data that's available.

Hugh Gordon: — So that's not something that GEM will do for you? You will have to do that in addition?

Brittany Csada: — For sure. I think it will provide the data; we'll still have to do some analysis around it.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Any further questions, committee members, with respect to chapter 11 here? Not seeing any at this time. Now these, we've already had motions to concur on these recommendations. You've laid out the actions to implement. Some have already been implemented. Thanks for that and the work that will be undertaken, the information you'll provide back.

At this point I'd welcome a motion of adjournment with respect to chapter 11.

James Thorsteinson: — I so move.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Moved by Deputy Chair Thorsteinson. All agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Okay, that's carried. Thanks so much for your time here today before us. Chair Csada, do you have any final words our way before we shift gears and break for lunch?

Brittany Csada: — Just wanted to say thank you again to the Provincial Auditor, to you, Mr. Chair, and to the committee members today for your time and questions.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Okay, thank you very much. Thanks to you all for your time here today, and thanks to everyone across government that's involved in the work that's reflected and discussed here today. Thank you.

Okay. So we'll recess for a brief lunch here and reconvene at 1:15.

[The committee recessed from 12:11 until 13:17.]

Public Accounts 2025-26 Volume 1

Chair Wotherspoon: — Okay, folks, we'll reconvene the Standing Committee on Public Accounts. We're going to turn our attention to the volume 1 Public Accounts for 2025-26.

And just as like a little bit of a statement for anyone that's kind of watching this at home, this is part of the committee's mandate is to review and report on the observations, opinions, and

recommendations of both the Provincial Auditor's reports and on the province's public accounts. And the review of the public accounts completes some of the accountability cycle of parliamentary control over the raising and spending of public dollars. We instituted this session a few years back, and we see it as an annual session, usually in the early fall following the tabling of the Public Accounts.

I'd like to give a shout-out to everyone involved in putting those public accounts together and a recognition just that you're real leaders in Canada in doing so. And I know there's incredible work done by all the folks out of Finance and the comptroller's office and our auditor's office as well. And we're the first public accounts to be tabled right across the country. And just like football, we like being first. We like beating those other places. So anyways, thank you to the incredible service that you all provide.

What I'd do at this time, we're going to have two presentations here. We're going to have that from Finance and the comptroller, and then we're going to turn it over to the auditor and her team to present, and then we'll open it up for questions. So at this time I would turn it over to Deputy Minister Smith and Provincial Comptroller Hebert to, I guess, introduce the officials that are here with you here today, here with us here today, and then to provide your remarks.

Tracey Smith: — Thank you, Mr. Chair, Deputy Chair, and committee members. Joining me here today from the ministry are Brent Hebert, the Provincial Comptroller; Cullen Stewart, assistant deputy minister of the fiscal policy division; Rod Balkwill, assistant deputy minister of the provincial treasury office. Jeff MacDonald, assistant deputy minister of treasury board secretariat, will be joining us shortly, and I do have . . . There are some other members of the team that are with us here today. And if they do end up coming and speaking on behalf of some of the questions, they'll introduce themselves at the time. So just a big thank you to the team for joining us here today.

On behalf of the Ministry of Finance, thank you for the opportunity to discuss the '25-26 Public Accounts volume 1, which includes the government's summary financial statements and related financial statement discussion and analysis. I would also like to thank the Provincial Auditor and her team for their audit work on the financial statements. We have an excellent working relationship with the Provincial Auditor's office, and we really appreciate and value that within our entire ministry.

Finance is committed to preparing timely, high-quality financial statements and analysis on behalf of the government, which are the foundation of strong accountability and transparency. I am pleased to report that the '25-26 summary financial statements were released in June of 2025 and received a clean audit opinion from the Provincial Auditor.

I'm now going to turn it over to Brent to provide you with an overview of the financial statements and results for the fiscal year '25-26.

Brent Hebert: — Thank you, Tracey. Good afternoon, Mr. Chair, Deputy Chair, and committee members. I'm pleased to present the Government of Saskatchewan's Public Accounts volume 1 containing the summary financial statements and

related analysis for the year ending March 31st, 2026.

These statements report the financial results of the full government reporting entity, including the General Revenue Fund, Crown corporations, boards, and other government service organizations. A listing of the organizations that comprise the government reporting entity can be found in schedule 19 on pages 85 to 87 in the Public Accounts volume 1.

The statements were prepared in accordance with Canadian public sector accounting standards and received an unmodified or clean audit opinion from the Provincial Auditor. The statements include a retroactive accounting policy change for amortization of certain tangible capital assets, which increased the opening accumulated operating deficit by 92 million, and this restatement did not affect net debt.

Overall the key takeaway from the '25-26 financial results is that revenue was essentially on budget, while higher service demand in health services, higher compensation, and extraordinary wildfire response costs drove expenses above budget and resulted in \$947 million operating deficit.

In terms of overall financial results, total revenue was 21.13 billion, or 77 million, 0.4 per cent above budget. Total expense was a little over 22 billion, 1 billion or 4.9 per cent above budget. The operating deficit was 947 million, as I mentioned, compared with a budgeted surplus of 12 million. The 960 million deterioration from budget was predominantly expense driven. Revenue remained close to plan.

At year-end accumulated deficit was 2.39 billion, an increase of 629 million from budget due to the operating deficit net of remeasurement gains.

In terms of revenue, taxation revenue was 10.34 billion, 114 million above budget. Corporation income tax was above budget while most other tax categories were below planned.

Non-renewable resource revenue was 2.73 billion, 33 million above budget. Stronger potash and resource surcharge revenue more than offset weaker than expected oil and natural gas revenue.

Net income from government business enterprises was 537 million, 168 million below budget, mainly reflecting lower utility results. Other own-source revenue was 3.53 billion, or 268 million above budget, largely because of stronger fee revenue and output-based performance standards revenue.

Federal transfers were 4 billion, 58 million above budget, mainly from health and agricultural income stability funding. Overall 81 per cent of revenue came from Saskatchewan own-source revenue and 19 per cent from federal transfers.

On the expense side, health expense was 8.67 billion, 667 million above budget. Key factors were higher service demand, compensation pressures, physician utilization, drugs, medical supplies, and information technology costs.

Education expense was 4.53 billion, 100 million above budget, reflecting collective bargaining costs, school maintenance, specialized classroom investments, and a residential school

claim settlement.

Social services and assistance was 1.9 billion, 54 million above budget, driven by higher utilization, expanded eligibility, and benefit rate increases.

Protection of persons and property was 1.5 billion, 405 million above budget, primarily because of wildfire response and evacuations in '25-26, higher correctional facility costs, and increased policing costs.

Agriculture expense was 1.24 billion, 356 million below budget due to improved crop yields and reduced crop indemnities.

From an overall operations perspective, the largest year-over-year increases were salaries and benefits, up 701 million, mainly due to collective bargaining increases; and transfers, up 585 million, mainly due to the rate affordability grant, higher AgriStability benefits, increased funding to community-based organizations, and wildfire evacuation support. Operating costs decreased by 429 million, primarily due to lower crop insurance payments paid to producers, as I mentioned, due to higher crop yields across the province.

In terms of financial position in debt, net debt was 17.17 billion, 350 million above budget. The increase reflects the operating deficit and net investment in tangible capital assets, partly offset by remeasurement gains. General debt was 25.57 billion, compared with 22.52 billion a year earlier. Borrowing supported the Saskatchewan capital plan and recent operating requirements.

Financing charges were a little over 1 billion, an increase of 14.7 million over budget. The average effective interest rate on gross debt remained at 3.5 per cent. And pension liabilities declined to 5.7 billion from 4.94 billion a year ago.

In terms of infrastructure and fiscal health, government-owned infrastructure investment totalled 4.12 billion — 2.56 billion by government business enterprises and 1.56 billion by government service organizations. Investment supported schools, hospitals, roads, electricity generation and transmission, and communications networks. A further 299 million was provided to third parties for capital purposes such as municipalities.

Saskatchewan improved to the highest overall provincial credit standing when ratings from Moody's, S&P Global ratings, and Morningstar are considered.

Fiscal sustainability indicators reflected some pressure in '25-26 from the operating deficit and continued infrastructure investment. However own-source revenue relative to GDP [gross domestic product] remained generally stable, and financing charges remain a modest share of revenue.

Going forward, an important financial management priority will be continuing to balance service demand and infrastructure needs with a sustainable operating path and prudent debt management.

In closing I would like to acknowledge and thank our team in the Provincial Comptroller's division who work tirelessly to prepare the financial statements and analysis each year, and the folks behind me who provide a supporting role at Finance. I would also like to thank staff in the ministries, Crowns, and public agencies

that help us prepare these statements each year. We couldn't do it without them. And finally I'd like to thank the Provincial Auditor and her team for their audit work and the strong working relationship we have between our offices.

And with that I'll turn things back over to you, Mr. Chair. Thank you.

Chair Wotherspoon: — All right. Well listen, thank you very much. Thank you to all the officials that have joined us here today and all involved in the work here today as well. I'll turn it over to the Provincial Auditor to introduce officials and make a presentation, and then we'll go from there.

Tara Clemett: — Sure. Thank you, Mr. Chair, Deputy Chair, committee members, and officials. With me today is Mr. Trevor St. John, and he is the engagement lead on the audit of the summary financial statements. And then behind is Michelle Lindenbach, and she is our liaison with this committee but also would have worked on — as everyone does in my office — on the summary financial statements.

Our office annually audits the government's summary financial statements which are included in Public Accounts volume 1. These financial statements include the combined financial results of all of the government agencies that are controlled and reports the financial performance of the entire government and the financial condition of the province.

Through our audit opinions the Office of the Provincial Auditor provides independent assurance to the members of the Legislative Assembly and the people of Saskatchewan that public money is spent as presented, and sufficient information and disclosures are provided to inform users about the provincial government's actual financial results. Our office follows generally accepted auditing standards when forming our audit opinion on the government's financial statements.

The audit process involves collecting and evaluating audit evidence. The audit of the summary financial statements focuses on coordination of and timely receipt of reliable — in this case, audited — financial information from over 150 agencies for the consolidation of the summary financial statements. Through this process we can provide a high level of assurance to users about whether the financial statements are fairly presented and free from material misstatements.

[13:30]

The provincial government follows Canadian public sector accounting standards when preparing the government's financial statements. Our audit assesses whether the financial statements are presented in accordance with those standards. It is important that the government does follow the standards to support the credibility, the reliability, the quality, and the comparability of the government's financial information.

For the year ended March 31st, 2026, we issued an unmodified, or clean, audit opinion. This means the financial statements comply with public sector accounting standards, and there are no material misstatements in the numbers or notes presented in the financial statements, which means any material errors found were corrected.

The audit opinion was dated June 18th, 2026, which continues to be one of the earliest in all the provinces across Canada. And thanks to a lot of hard work by a great team of people at the Provincial Comptroller's office as well as my office.

Our audit opinion is also a place where you will find out where we report the more significant key audit areas that we focused on in the audit, and basically it required more significant auditor attention and effort. We include these as key audit matters in the audit opinion.

For the year ended March 31st, 2026, the key audit matters are significant management estimates and require a high degree of estimation and judgment. These matters include pension liabilities and individual and corporate income tax revenue. Pension liabilities amounted to \$5.7 billion in '25-26, and income tax revenue was 5 billion in '25-26. These accounting estimates are subject to measurement uncertainty, as they are subject to management's judgment, assumptions, and information that is available at the time of the estimate. Actual results may differ from estimates.

We address the significant management estimates in our audit by evaluating the reasonableness of management's assumptions and the methodology used to make the estimates. This included analyzing the accuracy of previous year estimates, testing the completeness and accuracy of the information used by management for making the estimate, and testing the estimate calculations. We may use the work of experts to help assess the reasonability of these estimates. So for example, when it comes to pension liabilities, we use actuary reports. Overall we found these accounting estimates were reasonable.

The government based decisions on reported assets and liabilities and how much money will be spent or generated in the future. It is vital to record all transactions and estimates as well as disclosures in the financial statements accurately.

This year's audit also required work around a new financial system called GEM and included completing work on the conversion of data from the old financial system to the new financial system.

The government's financial statements alone are not sufficient to communicate the complete picture of the province's financial health and annual results. The Public Accounts volume 1, which includes financial statement discussion and analysis, also provides additional explanations for significant variances from budget and prior years' financial results. It also provides data on key financial indicators that focus on the province's fiscal health. This report allows the public and this committee to ensure that public money was spent as the legislature intended.

Demonstrating public accountability is a key responsibility of public sector entities. Reporting accurate financial results in the public accounts and through our associated audit opinion, they show it does play a major role in fulfilling a government's duty to be publicly accountable and transparent. It is a key part of the government's accountability cycle, reporting what the government planned or budgeted and then closing the loop by accurately reporting what actually happened.

That concludes my presentation.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Thank you very much, Auditor. We'll open it up now to committee members that may have questions. MLA Gordon.

Hugh Gordon: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. Thank you for coming today and taking our questions. Mr. Comptroller, you went over a number of interesting statistics, so we may have to return to them and you may have to repeat yourself. I apologize in advance, but I'd like to get some more details to better our understanding here at the committee.

Let's start with the final deficit number from this year that's being reported in '25-26. I know you've given some rationale, but could you maybe zero in specifically a little bit better for us how do we account for this final year's deficit number for this fiscal year being so wildly over the budget estimate of \$12 million?

Brent Hebert: — Thanks for the question, Member. So as I stated before, revenue was relatively stable in '25-26, so the pressures were on the expense side. So from a health perspective I had mentioned that the health costs — and there was health pressures last year — there's about a 667.7 million increase in health. And that was primarily driven by the Saskatchewan Health Authority reflecting salary pressures, including an accrual for retroactive pay associated with the recently tabled offer, as well as increased overtime in unbudgeted positions, higher payments to physicians, new physician contracts, inflationary and service volume pressures in the system, and a net loss related to a scheduling system writedown.

The other large part of that expense pressure was on the protection of persons and property, mainly with the Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency and the expenditures resulting from significant wildfire and evacuation responses that occurred in '25-26.

Hugh Gordon: — Just as a follow-up, you know, I think with the wildfires, it's very difficult to predict in advance. You're going through your budgeting processes to determine what kind of wildfires you're going to face. In spite of all the best preparations in anticipation, that one I can understand would be a, you know, unforeseen cost to a good amount.

But when it comes to health and when it comes to education, I just recall — and you may correct me for the record if you wish — but I recall that, you know, what the government actually spent the year prior was actually less than what they budgeted for this past year.

And so you know, I guess this all speaks to the question of reliability in the budgeting process. Part of that is special warrants spending. And I'm just wondering if you could tell the committee how much of this expense side pressure you're talking about is a direct correlation with special warrants spending. Like how much do you attribute the special warrants spending to the increase to the deficit?

Brent Hebert: — Thanks for the question, Member. So when we look at the special warrant funding that was provided, and if you look at Health specifically, there were a number of areas where utilization in, you know, in programs and services — the drug plan, the Cancer Agency, eHealth Saskatchewan, physician

services — where utilization pressures were just higher than what was expected and budgeted for the year.

In addition to that, there was a significant amount of compensation, increase in compensation costs that had been accrued into the year. And there was higher than budgeted Canadian Blood Services utilization. So it was utilization based, and they were utilization levels that were not expected, you know, going into the year when the budget was set.

Hugh Gordon: — So you're saying that these were completely unexpected. Nobody had forecast them. Like so for example, we've known every year of the amount for service in our health care sector; we know also perhaps a number of other ministries like Education and Social Services. The numbers don't usually go down. They go up, particularly with the health care file, you know. And it seems that every year the government's become increasingly reliant on special warrant spending to meet service needs.

So I guess my question is just specifically around, you know, why isn't there just better thought and emphasis put at the beginning of the budget process when looking at these major expense items so that we are anticipating it better. That's my question, is we've gone from a \$12 million surplus now to nearly a billion-dollar deficit. And we could also tell in last year's budget that the amounts that were allotted for health care, for example, didn't even equal the actuals for the year prior.

So I don't know. Is there an expectation then that health care spending was going to drop this year?

Brent Hebert: — I think given the year prior, there was a significant amount of compensation, collective bargaining amounts that were paid out the prior year, so those were rolled into the base. And so those weren't expected to create pressures. But I think primarily it's around that utilization base and the forecast that they build the budget on in terms of utilization of services which, you know, in the end those forecasts and the utilization exceeded what was budgeted for.

Chair Wotherspoon: — MLA Pratchler.

Joan Pratchler: — If we would take out those few COVID years — let's say those three COVID years — is the amount of special warrant spending comparable, greater, or lesser over the five years prior to COVID, five years post-COVID? Like were we better at estimating how much we were going to be spending pre and post?

[13:45]

Tracey Smith: — Thanks for the question. I'll maybe just start. I know the team has, you know, details obviously. And we've got lots of information in the Public Accounts document. But I'll just maybe start generally. You sort of asked that question around, you know, if we were to exclude those COVID years and sort of look at things from pre-COVID versus post-COVID.

I think just more a general comment that I would make — and I do still feel relatively close to my previous role at Health just in terms of, you know, a lot of the pressures that were experienced during COVID. But I would also just say coming out of COVID

— and this isn't just unique to Health — but we really have seen it across the entire province and across all sectors in terms of the impact.

We have had a higher population growth throughout the province when we think about that relative to pre-COVID years. We've had some inflationary costs due to the supply chain issues that we've had. We've had sort of new drugs coming on board. And then with all of that, you just think about utilization and access to services.

And again, I know we spent some time here talking about health already, but I can say in the other sort of sectors that are very much services to the public and to patients and to students, that utilization . . . we have seen an increase, you know, over recent years relative to sort of pre-COVID.

So I would just say generally . . . I know I used to do that myself a lot here, trying to sort of look at the environment pre-COVID, look at it post-COVID. But we really are in some different times, unique times where we are seeing sort of the impact, both challenges around pressures. But a lot of that is because of a lot of the positive in terms of like population growth, investment in Saskatchewan. And we're seeing that on some of our other sort of service ministries, is how I would characterize that.

Joan Pratchler: — But I guess what I'm trying to understand is how does the impact of increased warrants impact the reliability of the government's budget number and forecasting?

Tracey Smith: — You know, I would just comment that when we go through the budget process and you are sort of forecasting what that future state looks like, taking into consideration all the things you do know, the reason why we do need to use special warrants from time to time — and again, I know that there were a number of ministries that have had to use that in recent years — it is really to deal with some of those unanticipated pressures or pressures that are, you know, that extend beyond what was originally forecasted at the time when you were using the information that you had available.

So that is one of the, you know, the areas that we need to look to sometimes, but that is . . . You don't go into the budget, you know, sort of preparing for that. You really are trying to prepare with the best information that you have at the time in order to make those decisions as you go forward around the budget.

Joan Pratchler: — Thank you.

Chair Wotherspoon: — MLA Gordon.

Hugh Gordon: — I'll just turn your attention to pages 8 and 9. I'm just wondering if you could explain what factors contributed to the accumulated deficit going up year over year and by budget.

Brent Hebert: — Thanks for the question, Member. So you're referring to the table on the bottom of page 9, the accumulated deficit surplus. So that accumulated deficit surplus is just an accumulation of the deficits and surpluses that government has run over the 10-year period. So if you see it trending up from 2022, we are posting surpluses till we get to 2024. And then we've posted a small deficit in '25, and then the deficit that we're now recognizing from 2026 — \$947 million. So it's an

accumulation of those surplus deficits over that 10-year period.

Hugh Gordon: — Fair enough. But you mentioned in your report that that's primarily due to the operating deficit with a slight offset with remeasurement gains. Could you tell us what kind of remeasurement gains those were?

Brent Hebert: — Yeah, sure. If you flip over to page 47, we have a statement of accumulated remeasurement gains and losses, and so essentially it's the operating deficit net of those accumulated remeasurement gains and losses. So those are the unrealized changes, gains or losses of the fair value of financial instruments. And so they're remeasured at a point in time based on market conditions and interest rates. And so those remeasurements gains and losses are netted off against the operating deficit to come to the ending amount.

Hugh Gordon: — Thank you.

Brent Hebert: — Yeah, you're welcome.

Chair Wotherspoon: — MLA Pratchler.

Joan Pratchler: — Could you provide some more details on the government's investments into infrastructure, namely what are the 2.56 billion for government business enterprises and a 1.56 billion in schools, hospitals, roads, and government services organizations? And is the amount of government investment in capital infrastructure actually down from the year prior then?

Brent Hebert: — Thanks for the question. If you go to page 11 in the . . . I think that's where you're at, right? So you look at 2026. So the lighter blue bars there with respect to government service organizations, the 1.56 billion and the 0.3, those would be on budget. The enterprise capital acquisitions for government business enterprises, so the Crowns, that was 2.56 billion. That's about \$200 million less than what was planned on the Crown side.

Joan Pratchler: — And then right next to . . .

Brent Hebert: — And I think you asked like what made up the capital expenditures.

Joan Pratchler: — Yes.

Brent Hebert: — So I can give you a bit of an overview. So the 2.49 billion in utility Crown corporations, that was SaskPower, SaskTel, SaskEnergy, and SaskWater. I don't have the specific projects, but that 2.49 billion was spread across those four Crowns. 646 million was expended in the health care sector, mainly hospitals and integrated facilities. P.A. Vic [Prince Albert Victoria Hospital] would have been one of the larger ones on that one.

There was 440 million on transportation infrastructure, mainly highways. 257 billion in the education sector, so mainly schools, universities, and capital improvements at Sask Polytechnic. And then 195 million for community development, which would have been mainly grants to municipalities for capital infrastructure.

Joan Pratchler: — Okay, thank you. And then the description that's right beside that chart at the top of page 11, it says, "In

addition, 299 million was provided to third parties.” Could you give me an example of third parties?

Brent Hebert: — Sure. Like so that would be municipalities.

Joan Pratchler: — Okay, thank you.

Brent Hebert: — As an example.

Joan Pratchler: — Why was the investment from budget in government-owned infrastructure down 558 million, as per page 11?

[14:00]

Brent Hebert: — Okay so maybe, Rod, you can take that one. Thanks for the question. It’s a bit of a technical question so I’m just trying to find my words here for you. So we talked about the 200 million already of Crown. So there’s the \$299 million that we’re talking about in terms of third parties. That’s capital funding that’s expensed because it’s transferred to universities, as an example, or Sask Polytechnic. So it’s identified as capital, and it’s a capital transfer, but ultimately it’s expensed by the third party.

Chair Wotherspoon: — MLA Gordon.

Hugh Gordon: — How does the 2.56 billion to government business enterprises compare to last year? And what are those amounts?

Brent Hebert: — Thanks for the question, Member. So we had 2.56 for 2026, and it was 2.689 billion for 2025.

Hugh Gordon: — And do I understand correctly then that that is money that was transferred to the government business enterprises, is that a form of a loan? Is that a form of a grant? That is just money for operating?

Brent Hebert: — No, so that 2.69 billion in 2025 and 2.56 billion in 2026, that’s self-funded capital in those government business enterprises.

Hugh Gordon: — So that would be money just given to them to continue operations.

Brent Hebert: — Part of their operations.

Hugh Gordon: — Part of their operations. There wasn’t any specific project that that was associated to?

Brent Hebert: — Just the ones I mentioned earlier, just over the four Crowns.

Hugh Gordon: — Okay.

Brent Hebert: — So their own self financed capital.

Hugh Gordon: — Okay. Thank you.

Brent Hebert: — The big jump in those two years, Cullen is telling me, is the Lanigan gas plant, to be more specific.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Just before you move on to that, you

said that it was down \$200 million less than was budgeted in this year. What does that reflect? What capital project didn’t advance, or what is that associated with?

Brent Hebert: — Thanks for the question, Mr. Chair. So I think that’s reflected in just the cash flows of the projects that they have going, and cash flows change from one year to the next.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Sure. Hard line . . . [inaudible].

Brent Hebert: — Yeah. Yeah.

Chair Wotherspoon: — MLA Pratchler.

Joan Pratchler: — What factors do you foresee contributing to the province’s credit rating? Is there a particular level of debt or deficit that could see that rating being affected? Because our net debt-to-GDP is up now.

Brent Hebert: — We’ll ask Rod to take that one.

Rod Balkwill: — Hi, I’m Rod Balkwill, the ADM of the provincial treasury office. Thanks for your question. So there are many things that come into play when a credit rating agency issues a credit rating on a province or an issuing entity. And so there a few ratios, like hard numbers that they follow including debt-to-revenue, interest expense compared to total revenue, like how much of your expenses is being absorbed by interest costs. Higher debt, higher interest rates can mean higher interest costs.

But they also look at many qualitative things like history of the practice of the province in terms of their balanced budgets, things they’ve done for example in terms of repayment of debt during good times. So we had that experience in 2022-23 where large surpluses precipitated the ability to pay back two and half billion dollars of debt. So they look at that as good practice.

Other things like liquidity — how much money do we hold as a province for hard times that could come, like immediately available cash should we not be able to borrow or expenses go up unexpectedly.

So there’s a number of things. So I wouldn’t want to put a number on what would precipitate any kind of rating action from the rating agencies just because of those other things.

We’re also rated as a group, the provinces. So we’re in comparison to what the other provinces are doing. And at the moment Saskatchewan has some of the more favourable credit metrics, you know, those two things I mentioned. The debt repayments, debt-to-GDP overall is lower than 9 out of the 10 provinces. So I think I’m missing one . . . The other nine provinces except one.

So generally those are all things that we try to manage. But I wouldn’t be able to put a number on what debt level or interest expense level would precipitate a rating action. Thank you.

Chair Wotherspoon: — You spoke about liquidity. Could you speak, kind of give us a picture of liquidity right now?

Rod Balkwill: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. So when we’re talking about liquidity of course we’re talking about extra cash or

investments that can be immediately converted into cash in times of stress. And the province has a policy at the treasury office to maintain a certain level of immediately available cash. We run that between 1.25 billion and 1.75 billion. That's been in place and is reviewed by the treasury board as a policy.

We will go higher than that when we have a bond maturity or some other large acquisition that we need to have funds for, so it can go up higher than that. And then in addition we have cash in the system that maybe isn't available for liquidity, but is in various entities that is there to run those operations.

If you look at page 32, there is some details on financial assets. As of the end of 2026 if you look at the stacked bar, the 4.03 billion, that's current liquidity that's outstanding, including those other entities within the government. But within immediately available, that's probably around 3 billion of immediately available liquidity.

We also have other liquid assets that aren't intended for liquidity but for other purposes, for example the Small Modular Reactor Investment Fund which is 900 million. Again have short-term liquid bonds for other purposes, and also the sinking fund which has been in place for decades to repay debt. And that's currently at a level of \$4 billion which allows us to have money available when bonds mature, which provides liquidity for refinancing.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Thanks. Thanks for that. And just one other piece that you identified there was the borrowing cost relative to revenues. Could you just provide us some numbers on the trend, what that percentage is at right now and what it's been over the last number of years, and then what sort of forecast you have moving forward?

Rod Balkwill: — Thanks again for the question. So in terms of interest costs as a percentage of revenue, that is one that credit rating agencies look at and it's essentially compared around all the provinces. And we're currently running at 5.1 per cent, as you can see on page 14 of the Public Accounts. That's risen steadily for the last two years from 4 per cent, partly due to your higher debt levels for capital investments in executive government as well as higher refinancing rates as interest rates have gone up and maturing debt that has lower rate has rolled off the books.

I'll just mention that, at 5.1 per cent, we're the second-lowest in Western Canada compared to BC [British Columbia], Alberta, Manitoba and indeed I think across the country.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Thank you for that. MLA Gordon.

Hugh Gordon: — So the graphs on page 13 with respect to net debt to GDP, net debt to revenue, net debt per capita, I understand you're attributing it to operating deficits and significant infrastructure investments for the most part. Correct me if I'm wrong in any of that, by the way.

Can you just tell us what portion the operating deficits have contributed to that? Like is there a particular percentage that they've contributed to that?

[14:15]

Rod Balkwill: — Thank you. Just to clarify, was your question

about how much was from this year and last year? How much of the deficit contributed to the change in net debt?

Hugh Gordon: — Right. Percentage.

Rod Balkwill: — Percentage, okay. So just going by page 48 in the Public Accounts, there's a statement of change in net debt that does list all the components of the change. So in 2026, the \$947 million deficit, there was a \$947 million deficit and a \$1.537 billion increase in net debt. So the deficit accounted for 61.6 per cent of the increase in net debt for that year.

In 2025 there was a deficit of 249 million with a total increase in net debt of 1.281 billion. So the deficit accounted for 19.3 per cent of the increase in net debt for that year.

Hugh Gordon: — Thank you.

Rod Balkwill: — You're welcome.

Chair Wotherspoon: — MLA Pratchler.

Joan Pratchler: — So we're now spending over a billion dollars a year on debt financing costs. Has an assessment been made as to how much this is actually impacting the province's ability to pay for services such as health care, education, and supports for people?

Cullen Stewart: — Cullen Stewart, assistant deputy minister with the fiscal policy division. Thank you for your question, Member. When you look back over the last number of years of actuals, whether education, protections of properties and person, social services and assistance, and health care, there's been substantial increases in all of those areas providing human services, and the capital plan continues to be quite elevated in terms of investments in hospitals, schools, highways, those sorts of things.

So with respect to the ability of the province to manage that within, you know, the consideration of financing charges, we do have the best credit rating in Canada, and that was reaffirmed again this summer. So I think the view of the credit rating agencies would be the province is in a strong fiscal position to manage its debt load relative to the size of the economy and the expenditure commitments that we have.

Joan Pratchler: — Okay. So in some worlds, the best prediction of future behaviour is past behaviour. It's the same in the financial world. If we keep at the current pace of debt and service costs, are you as financial experts worried about the future of financial health or providing or being able to respond to human services as we just mentioned over the next four years, let's say?

Tracey Smith: — Thank you again for the question. You know, just circling back I think your question was around sort of four years out and I'll just sort of, you know . . . Obviously it's difficult to be looking out that far ahead. And I think with respect to what we've been talking about today, again just as we develop the budget and as we go through that process, we take into consideration all of those factors.

And the credit rating agencies, as they did this year, again reaffirmed us as having the best credit rating in all of Canada.

And they take those factors into consideration in terms of debt servicing and financing charges relative to the whole budget. Throughout the process . . . again when we go through the budget development process we make those assessments continually, you know, each and every year as we're working through that. And again those are sort of key metrics that . . . those are what the credit rating agencies use too in terms of understanding just the overall fiscal sort of environment that we're in. They don't look at any one single indicator. It's a whole series of indicators that are taken into account.

And I can say that the team here as well, as we're going through those budget cycles, we take all of those pieces into consideration as well so that we have a good understanding of where we sit relative to those different indicators.

[14:30]

Joan Pratchler: — Thank you.

Chair Wotherspoon: — MLA Gordon.

Hugh Gordon: — I guess the concern that we're trying to relay here is, you know, we're now spending more on debt charges, interest than we are on a good number of government ministries and departments. Maybe the majority of them. Obviously not the bigger ones, like health care, education, what not. But we're seeing, you know, that burden accumulate.

And you know, I get notices all the time from my credit card company saying that I'm good for a \$30,000 limit, but I'm not like taking that as an indicator of my own personal financial health either. You know what I mean? So the ability to continue to operate today is good to know. But I would hope that there is some honest assessments happening within the ministry and the Finance minister and this government about its spending decisions and how this is going to impact their ability to deliver these services as our interest payments continue to grow. This has to be a cause for concern.

With that I'll move on to another question. From page 15, I see that there was a slight decrease to the amount of government's own-source revenue to GDP from last year. Can you tell the committee what that is attributed to?

Brent Hebert: — Thanks for the question, Member. We had an income drop . . . You know, recall back the previous fiscal year we had recognized \$400 million from the tobacco settlement. So it was recognized, of course, that year and dropped off this year from revenue. And then the lower-than-expected net income from GBEs [government business enterprise] also was a factor in that ratio by now.

Hugh Gordon: — Sorry. A decrease in the income . . .

Brent Hebert: — Sorry. Of Crowns. GBE.

Hugh Gordon: — Oh, sorry.

Brent Hebert: — My apologies.

Hugh Gordon: — Thank you.

Brent Hebert: — Yeah.

Chair Wotherspoon: — MLA Pratchler.

Joan Pratchler: — The government appears to be increasingly dependent on transfers from the federal government for health care and some things in education. I want to just hone in on page 28, bottom right-hand part. This year-over-year increase is also due to . . . The beginning of that paragraph there, that's where I'm referring to. And it's the second bullet. It says that it was due to "increased spending related to the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement."

I trust that is from what? How much of Saskatchewan money went into that? Or was that just spending of what the federal government had given in the first place? Because I know from years gone by there was a lot of rollovers from one year to the next. And is the increased funding really just spending the federal government funding now as opposed to the past few years? Or has this government actually put money into child care for increased spending? Because I don't have an answer to that one.

Brent Hebert: — Thanks for the question. So that is increased spending of the federal dollars that flow to the province. And I think it was about \$12 billion, I'm told, increase in spending. But it's the spending of the federal dollars on that program.

Joan Pratchler: — Thank you. And just a follow-up to that. So this spring there was an announcement that there was going to be more money coming into child care. And we did the calculations along with some people from . . . child care experts across the country. They estimated it was roughly 97 million that would be coming into child care as an additional funding allotment to Saskatchewan. I was wondering, was that put into these numbers for this year or is that next year?

Brent Hebert: — That's a '26-27 number. Yeah.

Joan Pratchler: — Okay. Thank you. Can you explain what contributed to the increase in corporate revenue this year?

Brent Hebert: — Thanks for the question, Member. So it's just higher than expected prior-year adjustments from corporate tax revenue. So as people file their tax returns and there is adjustments made, we get those adjustments . . . Yeah, exactly. So just higher than expected tax adjustments.

Chair Wotherspoon: — MLA Gordon.

Hugh Gordon: — Thank you very much. Turning your attention to page 24, talking about other own-source revenue. I want to focus on the output-based performance standards. The Sask Party government has assured the people of the province we're the first carbon tax-free jurisdiction in the country. Yet it's quite clear that we're continuing to impose an industrial carbon tax on businesses and industries, and that money we're reliant upon in order to help pay the bills.

My question is, in spite of that, do I understand it correctly that in spite of assurances from the government, that the amount of carbon tax collected from businesses and industries this past year went up, actual year to actual year?

Brent Hebert: — Thanks for the question, Member. So the government is in negotiations with the federal government on that front, but the legislation is still in place. And so we are required to continue accruing that revenue until that legislation changes and those negotiations . . . from an end to those negotiations. So we still have to accrue it because the legislation's in place. We have that obligation.

Hugh Gordon: — Fair enough. Just a couple of follow-ups on that then. Can you give the committee any idea of a timeline of when they expect those negotiations to pay dividends?

Brent Hebert: — Not at this time.

Hugh Gordon: — Okay. Fair enough. Is that an ongoing process? Is that something that the government, the provincial government and federal government are negotiating on a regular basis? Can you give us an idea as to whether or not, like there are plans to have a meeting with the Minister of Finance for Canada and the Minister of Finance from Saskatchewan and tell us when they're going to hammer out a deal?

Brent Hebert: — I don't have those details. All I can say is there's negotiations happening in terms of those specifics. That isn't something we can share or answer.

Hugh Gordon: — Fair enough. The other follow-up on that question is, the province has removed the consumer portion of the carbon tax on utility bills, correct? I was wondering if you can share with the committee how the government is intending to make up for the loss of that revenue on the consumer portion of the carbon tax.

[14:45]

Brent Hebert: — Thanks for the question, Member. So of course, you know, that portion is also part of these negotiations. But in terms of mitigating impacts on rates, there was a rate affordability grant that was a float to SaskPower at Q3 to mitigate the impacts of that on ratepayers.

Hugh Gordon: — Thank you.

Chair Wotherspoon: — MLA Pratchler.

Joan Pratchler: — Are you able to provide the committee with an estimate of the extra revenue the government will be collecting on oil and gas revenues for '26-27?

Brent Hebert: — Thanks for the question. We're kind of leaking into '26-27, but there will be an update on that one at Q2, in the Q2 mid-year update.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Let me just remind members I think that the focus of the work is out of the Public Accounts. It's kind of the after-the-fact audit. In this case it's the books of '25-26. There might be some questions that might be appropriate when we're looking, you know, forward looking regarding information they'd have around trends or information or work plans that they have. But I think that that's a fair response. MLA Gordon.

Hugh Gordon: — Thank you. Can you explain to the committee what kinds of health care fees are being charged for the province

for what services? On page 24 it seems to indicate that that amount has gone up by \$63 million if I'm not mistaken. I hope that's the right page on that . . . Fees, yeah, fees. Sorry, health care fees.

Brent Hebert: — Thanks for the question, Member. I guess looking at page 24, those increased health care fees are due to higher service volumes or rate increases mainly in supportive and long-term care and out-of-province services. That would be where the increases are coming from.

Chair Wotherspoon: — MLA Pratchler.

Joan Pratchler: — It appears that Crowns have had some losses if I look at from 2025 to 2026 schedule 14, page 80. I assume, if I put together what we've heard today, it was mainly because their operations cost more. Is that right?

Brent Hebert: — In the Crowns? Are you looking at schedule 3?

Joan Pratchler: — Schedule 14. Oh, maybe I should be on schedule 3, but now I'm on 14.

Brent Hebert: — No, that's okay. Pop over to schedule 3 on pages 66 and 67. And you look down — so this is just the investment in GBEs — and on page 66 down at the right-hand side, you'll get to net income loss for government enterprises. And so you'll see the net incomes that were brought into the revenue side of the financial statements across the board. So they've got the Crowns that are along the top, and you can see most Crowns had net incomes. SaskPower had a loss in '25-26, the Auto Fund — those were the two that had losses in '25-26. The rest of the Crowns had net incomes.

Joan Pratchler: — Thanks.

Brent Hebert: — Yeah, you're welcome.

Chair Wotherspoon: — MLA Gordon.

Hugh Gordon: — I was wondering if you could explain to the committee how the general debts shown on page 33 — I believe, public debt — appears to have grown by, and maybe I'm wrong on this number, but it appears to have grown by several billion from the year prior. How does the deficit factor into that number? I guess I'm referring to the operating side.

Rod Balkwill: — Thank you, Member, for the question. Regarding debt levels, increases from 2025 to 2026, a \$3 billion increase in debt, and 1 billion of that is attributable to the growth of the deficit, to finance the deficit. About 1.5 billion of that is to finance executive government capital expenditures.

We also increased debt to essentially pre-borrow for the next fiscal year to the tune of about 600 million. So it was not for specific projects this year, but was in anticipation of next year's, the following year's borrowing. So those are the components.

Hugh Gordon: — The 600 million is for what again?

Rod Balkwill: — To pre-borrow for the next fiscal year. So it's a timing difference between borrowing for needs in '25-26 that

are actually . . . We increased debt to partially borrow for the '26-27 fiscal year.

Hugh Gordon: — Can you explain to the committee how that works? It sounds to me as though you've borrowed the money, it's sitting in a bank account. What's it doing?

Rod Balkwill: — Yeah. Well when we borrow, it does go into liquid investments. And we earn a return that is commensurate with the term and maturity of the investments we put them in, which is essentially short term. So it earns a rate of interest right now, say, two and a half to three per cent. You can imagine, for the committee, like March 31st is a very important day but it's sort of arbitrary from a cash management perspective because we do have things that we need to pay for immediately after that. So it's sometimes prudent to borrow ahead of time so that money is available, say on April 15th or June 2nd or something like that.

So we don't manage to a particular date. We look forward the next three or four months and determine our cash needs. And sometimes that means borrowing more in the current fiscal year for cash needs that come up quickly in the next year.

Hugh Gordon: — But presumably the rate of return isn't equal to the rate for borrowing it.

Rod Balkwill: — That's absolutely correct, and it's a price you need to pay for that safety, that insurance, that you will have the money available. Because if we have a large outflow, say on a certain day, we have to plan three months in advance to raise that money. We can't just do it the day before. So that's the price of it. And we evaluate that cost, and generally write the . . . We're borrowing at a higher rate because it's longer term than the investments we're purchasing.

Hugh Gordon: — Thank you. Mr. Chair, that's all my questions. Thank you.

Chair Wotherspoon: — MLA Pratchler.

Joan Pratchler: — Last question. I'm trying to reconcile if I'm understanding things right. I hear that we have record spending in education, and then I see the chart on page 27. So it looks like that last bar on education is actually the spending for 2026. Is that right?

Brent Hebert: — Yes, that's correct. The last bar to the right? Yeah.

Joan Pratchler: — That looks like it's shorter than the one from the year before. Is that a typo or is that correct?

Brent Hebert: — Thank you, members. So the reason that is lower is because we had a major pension adjustment on the education side that lowered that spending that year.

Joan Pratchler: — Okay. So that would explain why it's less, but that's only the pension part?

Brent Hebert: — Right. The other thing I'll point out is that that education indicator is the education theme. So it's not just the Ministry of Education and boards of education; it includes post-secondary education, a number of other education institutions. So

Advanced Education, the Ministry of Education, and so boards of education, Immigration and Career Training, regional colleges — they're all rolled up into that education number. So when you look at that drop, there was a pension adjustment. But you know, you can't look at that and say, well that was just the boards of education spending. Because it's reporting on the theme, not just the boards of education.

Joan Pratchler: — So where would we find that delineated on the boards of education in here in terms of K to 12 [kindergarten to grade 12], pre-K to 12?

Brent Hebert: — You won't find it in the summary financial statements because they're all rolled up and consolidated.

Joan Pratchler: — Thanks.

Brent Hebert: — Member, just to follow up: if you go to page 46, I would note — my colleagues noted this — if you look at the expense line there for education, budget was 4.4 billion and the actual was 4.5 billion. So spending was up in education based on budget.

Joan Pratchler: — That does not include the pensions, this line right here, right?

Brent Hebert: — Yeah, the chart on page 29 was a percentage of total expense, not the actual total expense. Yeah.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Committee members, I'm just interested a little bit on the pension liabilities. You have the chart there, of course, page 33, and you see the trend that's there. Of course the defined benefits came to an end, so you see a downward trend on that financial pressure each year on the liability side, kind of from 2017 to 2026, down over about \$2 billion. 7.8 down to 5.7 billion, so down \$2 billion.

Now at the risk of looking into the future too far: what your forecasts are, can you speak to what that trend looks like for the next decade ahead based on the estimates? Does that trend just continue? Are you going to be down another 2 billion in 10 years? It's all based, of course, off factors of age and these other factors.

Brent Hebert: — We don't have those forecasts, Chair. But the reason why we don't have it is because of those actuarial and mortality assumptions and assessments that are done, you know, each year that impact that pension liability.

[15:00]

So we don't have a forecast here today, but generally it's pretty tough to forecast given the uncertainty around those assessments, actuarial and mortality assessments. And they change significantly every couple years when they're done by the plans.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Do equity markets factor into the pension liability? Does a more robust equity market, say, that we experienced for the last couple years, does that bring down that liability?

Brent Hebert: — Equity markets don't come into play because we don't fund them. And they will go down to zero, as my

learned colleagues pointed out. They will go to zero at one point eventually.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Yeah, understood. You spoke about crop insurance. You gave a little bit of a statement about it in your opening remarks. Could you speak around what the surplus situation was for crop insurance that would be reflected — I know it's rolled into agriculture — that would be reflected in these books?

Brent Hebert: — As of March 31st, 2026, surplus is 809 million.

Chair Wotherspoon: — And that's up by how much from the year prior?

Brent Hebert: — It was up 68.4 million over budget. I'm just trying to see what it was the previous year. It think it was around 600 million, but let me check. Yeah, the surplus the previous year was 665 million. So it's increased to 809.

Chair Wotherspoon: — And what about the reinsurance last year? How much reinsurance was taken on and at what cost for the year '25-26?

Brent Hebert: — We don't have that with us, Mr. Chair, but we can bring it back. We've got the numbers; we just don't have it with us.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Thanks. You can bring that back to the committee. And what should be the greatest concern regarding the financial vulnerability for Saskatchewan people when they're looking at . . . What measure do you believe is the one that folks that care about the financial position of the province, what should they be looking at? And what's the greatest risk or concern?

Tracey Smith: — Thanks for the question. I know you're asking for sort of that single kind of metric or measure, but I would just sort of just say generally I think the area that we really look to is around that revenue volatility around oil and commodity prices, exchange and interest rates, inflation. I think we can all appreciate just the environment that we're in right now in terms of, there is some uncertainty. So that's definitely sort of the key area that we're looking to to assess kind of where we're at very regularly.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Okay, appreciate that. Looking to committee members. Arm River? Nothing? Okay. Not seeing any further questions at this time. I think that gets us to the end of our questioning with respect to the volume 1 Public Accounts.

Thank you to everyone for the time here with us here today and to the auditor and to you all for what you do to compile this really valuable information. I think that, you know, Saskatchewan people care about our province, right. They care about our fiscal position. And you put good information in there for people to go and assess the financial state within the province. So thanks for your work on that front.

Not seeing any further questions here right now, I guess I would simply welcome a motion to conclude consideration of the 2025-26 volume 1 Public Accounts.

James Thorsteinson: — I so move.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Moved by Deputy Chair Thorsteinson. All agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

Chair Wotherspoon: — That's carried. Before we have a motion of adjournment, Deputy Minister Smith or Comptroller Hebert, do you have any final words for us before we shut this thing down?

Tracey Smith: — I just want to say a big thank you to the committee for the time today, for the questions. Again I want to extend a sincere appreciation to the Provincial Auditor's office, Tara and her team. And I also just want to acknowledge the fabulous team that is around me today and Brent for answering a lot of questions along with Rod and Cullen. A great team supported by other great people behind us. So just a huge thank you to everyone overall. Thank you.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Okay. Thanks so much. And you said you wanted to thank the really great team and Brent. Right, okay. Thank you. Thank you very much. Comptroller Hebert, any final words?

Brent Hebert: — No, I think I'll remain silent on that last comment. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Okay, folks, I would welcome a motion of adjournment.

James Thorsteinson: — I so move.

Chair Wotherspoon: — Moved by Deputy Chair Thorsteinson. All agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

Chair Wotherspoon: — This committee stands adjourned until Wednesday, October 14th, 2026 at 8:30 a.m.

[The committee adjourned at 15:08.]

CORRIGENDUM

On page 458 of the October 1, 2026 verbatim report No. 17 for the Standing Committee on Public Accounts, the ninth paragraph in the right-hand column was incorrectly attributed to John Fahlman. It is correctly attributed to Aaron Schweitzer.

The publication has been corrected online. We apologize for the error.