

# **PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE**

## **Inquiry into the 2024–25 Budget Estimates**

Melbourne – Thursday 23 May 2024

### **MEMBERS**

Sarah Connolly – Chair

Nicholas McGowan – Deputy Chair

Michael Galea

Mathew Hilakari

Lauren Kathage

Bev McArthur

Danny O’Brien

Aiv Puglielli

Meng Heang Tak



**WITNESSES**

Harriet Shing MLC, Minister for Equality; and

Peta McCammon, Secretary, and

Louise Perry, Deputy Secretary, Fairer Victoria and Engagement, Department of Families, Fairness and Housing.

**The CHAIR:** I declare open this hearing of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee.

I ask that mobile telephones now be turned to silent.

On behalf of the Parliament, the committee is conducting this Inquiry into the 2024–25 Budget Estimates. The committee's aim is to scrutinise public administration and finance to improve outcomes for the Victorian community.

I advise that all evidence taken by the committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. However, comments repeated outside of this hearing may not be protected by this privilege.

As Chair I expect that committee members will be respectful towards witnesses, the Victorian community joining the hearing via the live stream and other committee members.

Witnesses will be provided with a proof version of the transcript to check. Verified transcripts, presentations and handouts will be placed on the committee's website.

I welcome the Minister for Equality the Honourable Harriet Shing as well as officials from DFFH. Minister, I invite you to make an opening statement or presentation of no more than 5 minutes, and committee members will then ask questions. Your time starts now.

**Harriet SHING:** Thank you, Chair and committee members, for the opportunity to present to you today on the equality portfolio. I want to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the lands upon which we gather, the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation. I pay my respects to their elders past and present. I would also like to acknowledge any and all Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander leaders or emerging leaders who are here today or indeed who are participating in the work of achieving equality for LGBTIQ+ people all over the state.

**Visual presentation.**

**Harriet SHING:** I am really delighted to be able to talk to the work that we have done across the equality portfolio, including through the allocation of this year's budget, which exists as a portfolio to identify and to address and to reduce the sources of discrimination and therefore lesser life outcomes, increased hardship, increased vulnerability to discrimination, isolation, harassment and injury, increased likelihood of self-harm and of suicide, lesser capability as it relates to workforce and educational participation and a greater risk of vulnerability to homelessness.

*Pride in Our Future* is a strategy that was developed over a significant period of time and launched a couple of years ago. It is a 10-year strategy which is about making sure that we can deliver equality and inclusion in those ways set out in the portfolio overview on the screen now.

Next slide, please. Our election commitments include the launch of *Pride in Ageing*, which was a \$4.5 million announcement to acquit that election promise that I made recently at the Gippsland Pride Hub alongside Switchboard, which is auspicing that work to assist older LGBTIQ+ people to access safe and inclusive services and support, whether that is in aged care, in health care or in community participation. The Rainbow Tick accreditation rollout is another significant part of the work we are doing across the equality portfolio, because we know that symbols of safety play an incredibly important role in making sure that in a situation of shame, of hesitation, of self-exclusion and, all too often, of humiliation that making sure that accreditation to make sure that safety is at the heart of what we do. Rainbow Tick is important.

Grants programs include organisational development and capacity for the way in which we deliver on Victoria's Pride amongst other things, and the support to the Bendigo Queer Arts Festival, which was a one-off program, has made sure that we can see that event really shine on the regional stage. In partnership with Midsumma, we have delivered the third of Victoria's Pride street parties and regional activation programs. In the first instance we saw about 67,000 people attend events as part of Victoria's Pride, and it has been absolutely enormous as a way for people to come together. LGBTIQ+ people, allies, community members – it has really been an opportunity to celebrate inclusion and social cohesion. We also want to make sure that in delivering mental health and social supports we are investigating initiatives such as QHub and making sure that we have got those safety initiatives in place that also deal with peer support and statewide foundational training for people.

Next slide, please. When we address systemic and systematic reform, we also want to make sure, as *Pride in Our Future* indicates, a commitment to strength and to sustainability and this is where the funding of \$3 million for the equality portfolio in this year's budget provides us with an opportunity to do that. As I have said, Pride in Ageing, the Rainbow Tick, grants to support and celebrate communities and whole-of-government coordination and implementation of *Pride in Our Future* means that we are not confined to the equality portfolio, but rather that it is also informing whole-of-government work.

Next slide, please. The portfolio priorities are many and indeed varied but also determined. We want to make sure in delivering Pride in Place, the celebrations and pride season, public awareness campaigns for trans and gender-diverse communities we are facing the realities of hardship and of trauma that too many LGBTIQ+ people are experiencing. This is where we will continue to implement a range of initiatives, including across rural and regional Victoria.

Next slide, please. These are our achievements. We have 52,000 plus 34,000 – it is actually far more than 67,000 – so it is a really good outcome around participation, and we want to make sure that that continues, including for people who are most vulnerable particularly in the current climate.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much, Minister. The first 8 minutes go to the Deputy Chair.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Thank you, Minister. I am just looking at the budget paper here, 'Equality for LGBTIQ+ communities'. It was \$500,000, it is \$800,000 over the next few years and in the outlying years \$900,000. Can you give us a list of programs that that funding will support, or a description of the programs and how much each will receive?

**Harriet SHING:** I can take you through all of the programs – in terms of 2023–24 or 2024–25?

**Nick McGOWAN:** Let us start with the existing programs, 2024–25 if we can. Some will obviously be discontinued potentially, maybe.

**Harriet SHING:** The Bendigo Queer Arts Festival, that was that \$50,000 allocation that supported that festival to produce and enable LGBTIQ+ arts and cultural events. That was a one-off funding allocation consistent with the government's election commitment, so that was fully committed in 2023–24, and that was administered through a Victorian Common Funding Agreement. We have also got a range of other initiatives as far as the funding breakdown for 2024–25 goes. That includes the LGBTIQ+ Taskforce, a lived-experience LGBTIQ+ disability and inclusion expert advisory group; Commonwealth engagement, particularly with that strategy, the \$10 million that the Commonwealth has allocated for LGBTIQ+ particularly health outcomes, and assistant minister Ged Kearney is leading that work as one of the champions of an area where I would dearly love to see a federal equality portfolio, but otherwise she is doing a power of work; and cross-jurisdictional engagement to support other jurisdictions. Victoria leads with the *Pride in Our Future* strategy and also with an equality portfolio full stop, and nobody has invested more than we have. In fact a not-so-distant poll showed that Melbourne rates as the third most LGBTIQ+-friendly city in the world, and that is not by accident. Releasing the refreshed inclusive language guide and working with the Centre for Victorian Data Linkage have also been really important.

The 2024–25 budget allocation in output funding does deliver those multiple programs, which are set out in the budget papers. They include QHub; Victoria's Pride; health and wellbeing of people with an intersex variation; trans and gender-diverse peer support programs; the LGBTIQ+ public awareness raising campaign, which is expected to be launched in the coming months; Rainbow Tick funding to Rainbow Health; Pride in Ageing

grants; combating homophobia; and equality portfolio staffing, which includes the commissioner for LGBTIQ+ communities, and that is a process of recruitment and appointment that I am looking forward to resolving in the coming months following the significant contributions of Ro Allan and Dr Todd Fernando, and that work will continue on acquitting the work that we committed to in 2022.

**Nick McGOWAN:** That staffing cost, what does that account for in terms of the current year, the \$800,000? Do you have a figure for that?

**Louise PERRY:** Are you asking how many staff or –

**Nick McGOWAN:** No, the whole accounting cost that the minister referred to at the end. There were the programs and then at the end there were the staffing and related costs essentially – I am paraphrasing. I was just wondering what that takes up of the \$800,000. To put it another way, are you able to give us a breakdown of those funds?

**Harriet SHING:** It is \$800,000, Mr McGowan.

**Nick McGOWAN:** But the \$800,000 is not the total for staffing cost; that includes all the grants.

**Harriet SHING:** That is the total base funding, yes.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Are you able to provide a breakdown for the specific programs that you have listed there?

**Harriet SHING:** Of staffing required to deliver them?

**Nick McGOWAN:** Well, I imagine there are also separate line items that actually go to each of those projects separately, to support the projects. Have I missed the point here?

**Harriet SHING:** I am wondering, Mr McGowan, if you are referring to the \$800,000 versus the \$11 million.

**Nick McGOWAN:** The \$800,000, yes.

**Harriet SHING:** The \$11 million is for the total in terms of those allocations of grants and programs.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Yes. So what you are saying is that the \$800,000 is for the staffing and the \$11 million is for the programs and grants and so forth. Is that correct?

**Harriet SHING:** That is right.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Okay. My apologies. Thank you, Minister.

**Harriet SHING:** It must be getting late in the day. I almost need a chocolate biscuit myself.

**Nick McGOWAN:** It is. We got there in the end. Do we have a particular metric for the programs that you implement? Is there some kind of metric that you have to measure success or failure or influence or impact?

**Harriet SHING:** There are a range of ways that we can measure success in relation to inclusion and output. Those performance measures are often part of the way in which contracts are developed and delivered – for example, Q+Law – and the delivery of services and supports to people through client aggregate numbers, the work around achievement of total completion within a leadership program or more broadly across an events and participation space. It is also about the front loading that occurs when we develop guidelines for applying for, for example, an organisational development grant. Is it the execution of the event, for example? Has the event occurred? Have we seen the relevant numbers of participants, of applicants or of visitors? That is part of what is built into the way in which grant applications are submitted in the first instance if that provides you with some certainty.

**Nick McGOWAN:** Thank you, Minister. I am going to ask a selfish question: do you have any grants or programs in the electorate of Ringwood at all in the forward estimates?

**Harriet SHING:** In the electorate of where?

**Nick McGOWAN:** Ringwood – my electorate.

**Harriet SHING:** Well, there are a number of them.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Ringwood – it is a forgotten place, Minister.

**Harriet SHING:** Well, not for me, Mrs McArthur. Mr McGowan, there are a number of initiatives that are statewide, which also then have application across any number of different electorates and LGAs, so they will invite applications or participation from organisations or from individuals from all over the place. Again, particularly when we are talking about grants that have recently been allocated, just last Friday, on IDAHOBIT

**Nick McGOWAN:** I was going to ask you about that.

**Harriet SHING:** the International Day against Homophobia, Biphobia, Intersex Discrimination and Transphobia – I was in Dandenong. Many Coloured Sky received a grant of \$75,000 to be able to continue work and support for refugees and asylum seekers. You know, these people who are getting this support are actually from everywhere. That is one example of where and how the grants are actually distributing benefit to all parts of the state.

**Nick McGOWAN:** All grants are welcome in Ringwood, Minister. Thank you.

**Harriet SHING:** I will take that point as well made, Mr McGowan.

**Nick McGOWAN:** I was also going to ask whether you have considered anything in schools with that day, because I know that quite a lot of schools locally in my electorate of Ringwood did a lot of activities, so it would be good to be able to support them. I know it is an education portfolio responsibility, but in your responsibility the day itself was quite successfully celebrated, certainly, at the secondary college level.

**Harriet SHING:** We are enormously proud to support schools that champion inclusion. Safe Schools was one part of doing this. It was not part of the curriculum, but it was a resource to assist teachers, staff, students and school communities to be more inclusive, to have those symbols of safety and a visibility. We have the most extraordinary school communities doing the most amazing things, Mr McGowan. It is good to hear of your support for them.

**The CHAIR:** Mr McGowan looks so disappointed you are out of time.

**Harriet SHING:** The benefit I have, Mr McGowan, is that I can see the clock perhaps, and you cannot.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Galea.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Minister. Minister, I would like to talk in reference to budget paper 3, the output summary for the department, table 2.8, which outlines the LGBTIQ+ equality policy and programs, which include \$11.1 million just in this budget. Minister, you referred before that there is yet to be a federal ministry for equality. I know Victoria was the first, and it may still be the only state to have that portfolio. In light of the work that has already been done –

**Harriet SHING:** The ACT.

**Michael GALEA:** The ACT?

**Harriet SHING:** Yes.

**Michael GALEA:** Good. Well, we still can be leading amongst the states.

**Harriet SHING:** Population growth has us with an edge there, Mr Galea.

**Michael GALEA:** Very good. With the \$11.1 million in funding this year, how would expand upon those programs which you have already touched on and have already been delivered?

**Harriet SHING:** We want to make sure that we are in a position to assist with the delivery of the equality portfolio through the outputs of the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing but also across government more broadly. This is where, when I talk to the nature of equality as being a standalone portfolio, that is on the one hand about supporting LGBTIQ+ organisations, many of which have seen a dramatic increase in demand for support in the last 12 to 24 months. We allocated an additional \$900,000 to support 10 organisations, which about 14 months ago experienced a dramatic surge in demand for support.

This is where again the Victorian commissioner for LGBTIQ+ communities performs a really valuable role there too. The departure of Dr Todd Fernando in December last year necessitated a new process of recruitment, and that has been a really wonderful experience. To date the level of interest has been extraordinary, and it shows that there is an ever-growing level of enthusiasm and determination by LGBTIQ+ leaders not just to be part of decision-making and a way to mainstream better options and decisions around inclusions but also to create those pathways for leadership.

The justice working group, Mr Galea, which you are a very significant part of in that co-chairing responsibility, alongside the LGBTIQ+ taskforce and the other committees and the work we do more broadly within social cohesion are all contributing to the way that we can not only identify shortfalls in good outcomes but also augment and enhance what we are doing that is working well. I do want to give a specific mention to the work across the equality team within the department. It is hard going – it is hard going to have a very small but also very, very mighty portfolio getting into as many productive and proactive policy decisions as possible. We are also determined to make sure that we are continuing to resource that work. I am enormously proud of being part of a government where equality is prioritised and that it sits within those outputs that I have taken you through in the presentation.

There is always more work to do. We also know that it is as much about law reform and inclusion of institutional engagement and cultural improvement. Anti-vilification has been a big part of that work, and this is where the Attorney's works sits very much centrally to the downstream impact that will have once that legislation is developed and delivered. The health minister and her work are integral to the work that we are doing around engagement and support, and mental health minister Stitt's work is there as well. We also want to make sure that across everywhere from creative industries through to local government there are opportunities for inclusion. So it really does sit across just about every portfolio imaginable, and we are determined to make sure that those departmental objectives can continue to see those better outcomes over time.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you, Minister. I know that the taskforce and indeed the justice working group will be engaging quite strongly with the AG and her office around those anti-vilification reforms as well, so I look forward to seeing progress there. With the tightened fiscal environment that we are operating in, how are we going to ensure that the funding that is in this year's budget is going to most effectively support and target support for our LGBTIQ+ communities?

**Harriet SHING:** As I said earlier, equality is a small but mighty portfolio. Using comparatively –

**Danny O'BRIEN:** All due to the minister of course.

**Harriet SHING:** I beg your pardon.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** All due to the minister of course.

**Harriet SHING:** Well, no, Mr O'Brien, I would probably say that it is down to your contributions and effort, but –

**Bev McARTHUR:** Tell us more.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** The things I do for the community.

**Harriet SHING:** Well, humility always was one of your gifts.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Now, there is a revelation. Please expand.

**Harriet SHING:** Come on, Mrs McArthur, do not be like that. Have a bickie. One of the things that we have done is to deploy in the most efficient, inventive and collaborative way possible outcomes that partner, for

example, through Midsumma and creative industries, through the work with local government and the Rainbow Tick accreditation, through the gathering of data and the rainbow brick road, for example, which has just received a grant, and through the way in which mental health services are delivered and funded. Also Pride in Place and the housing portfolio itself are also about making sure that we lean into those areas of disadvantage and of exclusion.

This is about cultural change and inclusion as much as it is about institutional improvement, and that is against the backdrop of some often very turbulent narratives in the public domain. We should not underestimate that for the 11 per cent of Victorians who identify as LGBTIQ+ the aggregate disadvantage and shame that gather as a consequence of multiple exposures every day to being other and to being lesser require constant pushback. That pushback happens often in a low- or no-cost environment.

I am fiercely proud of the progress and the outcomes that have been delivered through this equality portfolio, as much as anything because they have been delivered by and for and with communities. They are not simply auspiced under government and implemented at large through flinging a grant into the ether and hoping for a good outcome. They are delivered by and for and with people with lived experience. So when we see that there is better connection to services and when we see that in the course of discussion around what it is that people need, we are also able to identify as much through the aggregation of data, as much as anything else, that outcomes can be delivered, and not only outcomes that address immediate need but which address that long-term disadvantage, that long-term exclusion and that whole-of-life inequity. This is where again the portfolio goes from strength to strength, even with a modest envelope over the four-year period.

There will always be people who say that the equality portfolio has funding which should be spent on something else. To my mind, the early intervention and prevention work, the transformation of shame into pride and the connection and the sense of belonging that people feel when they can access good culturally safe, well-designed, fit-for-purpose programs, supports and services, in a way that is consistent with pride in our future and in a way that demonstrates a commitment to safety and to dignity and to visibility, means that we are in fact making significant progress. That work needs to go on. This is where, again, the partnerships with the Commonwealth, the very significant level of engagement and determination from the federal government, this federal government – it has not always been this easy. It has not always been possible in fact to even have a conversation about this 11 per cent of the population. But to see that things are changing, even against the often very turbulent current of homophobia, of transphobia, of intersex discrimination and of biphobia, means that we are getting somewhere. To see the intergenerational change, to see us as old folks sitting around this table – except for you, Mr Galea; you are a young person –

**Nick McGOWAN:** Did you say ‘old’, Minister?

**Harriet SHING:** Yes – mature, Mr McGowan. I include myself in that. Sorry, Mr Hilakari, you are off the hook as well.

**Michael GALEA:** I note Mr Puglielli is younger than me.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Oh, we are the same age!

**Danny O’BRIEN:** You are in so much trouble now!

**Harriet SHING:** Lies! Okay. Well, all right.

**Danny O’BRIEN:** Where are you going to stop?

**Nick McGOWAN:** You had us up until then.

**Harriet SHING:** Off to privileges.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Just as well you brought biscuits.

**Harriet SHING:** I hope you got the best biscuits then.

*Members interjecting.*



**Danny O'BRIEN:** Ageist – unbelievably ageist.

**The CHAIR:** I think she was talking about maturity and, those to my left, I am not sure you would be included in that.

**Danny O'BRIEN:** Oh, that is like a knife, Chair!

*Members interjecting.*

**Harriet SHING:** Given the late hour – we do want to make sure, though, that we are continuing this intergenerational improvement and continuing to see that conversations are able to happen and happen safely because the settings have never been more inclusive; that when and as people want to get access to culturally safe health care or educational services, when and as people want to be able to access forms that reflect their identity, they can do so; that there is an element of contrition about the historical treatment of LGBTIQ+ people. This reflects determination, and it reflects determination and outcomes and achievements that have been secured, comparatively speaking, within a very small portfolio through dexterity and determination and innovation.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you, Minister. Quite a lot of what you said there but especially I think the phrase you used, 'the transformation of shame into pride', was very powerful. It is good to see what the equality portfolio is doing. Thank you.

**Harriet SHING:** Thanks, Mr Galea.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Minister. Thank you, Mr Galea. We will now go to Mr Puglielli.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you, Chair. Hello.

**Harriet SHING:** Hi.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** The Department of Health, as you would be aware, is continuing funding for a range of suicide prevention initiatives, and that includes Mind Australia's LGBTIQ+ aftercare program. We know that nationally LGBTIQ+ people have far higher rates of mental ill health and statistics of suicide than the general population.

**Harriet SHING:** Yes.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** I see \$3.8 million is allocated for this coming year for that respective line item to fund a number of suicide prevention programs, including aftercare, but there is no funding allocated beyond 2024–25. Will that program continue to be funded beyond?

**Harriet SHING:** Sorry, Mr Puglielli. There is nothing to indicate that it will not continue, but again it is that one-year funding, which has characterised a lot of the funding for programs that exist across government and in this case across the equality portfolio.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** So we should not take that as an indication that it will not be funded.

**Harriet SHING:** It is not a no, Mr Puglielli.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Yes, I understand. Thank you. Just progressing, the Department of Health is continuing funding for a range of health and wellbeing programs, including Drummond Street Services Qspace LGBTIQ+ family counselling service. I see \$2.8 million for that has been allocated for a number of programs, including those I have mentioned, just for this year. Can you expand a bit in more detail why it is a one-year funding cycle that we are seeing, not multiyear funding?

**Harriet SHING:** This is as much a symptom of the way in which government funding for program delivery occurs across much of government. Again, it is not a specific exclusion of longitudinal funding for the purpose of delivery of a program. In the case of, again, for an event, the Bendigo Queer Arts Festival, that was a one-off. It was specifically to deliver for one year. This is not to say, however, that funding is excluded from consideration for future years. The envelope, as I said, that we have to work with is small and requires every

single bit of efficiency that we can deliver. This is where, again, we assess and we consider the outputs and what they can actually anchor back to as far as the election commitments and the priorities that we have placed as part of the departmental statement and the budget announcements.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Sure. As you can appreciate, these groups, I am sure, they raise with you that they need the assurance of ongoing funding –

**Harriet SHING:** Absolutely.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** and I am seeking to assure that today.

**Harriet SHING:** This is also where grants come in, though. Again, just to give you a bit more context, the grants that were allocated last year, so the \$900,000 to the 10 organisations to assist with their dramatic upsurge in demand, one of those was Switchboard. Switchboard is also delivering the Pride in Ageing pilot. So there are a range of areas where people can get access to that funding, including through grants as well as programs, if that helps.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Yes.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Minister.

Minister and officials, our time together for this portfolio has come to an end. Thank you very much for appearing before the committee this afternoon. The committee will follow up on any questions taken on notice in writing, and responses are required within five working days of the committee's request.

I do want to say that if anyone listening or watching this afternoon is seeking advice or support, it is available. You can give Rainbow Door a call on 1800 729 367 or even send a text message to 0480 017 246, or alternatively you can call QLife on 1800 184 527.

The committee is going to take a very short break before beginning its consideration of the water portfolio at 2:30 pm.

I declare this hearing adjourned.

**Witnesses withdrew.**