

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Budget estimates 2020-21 (Spence)

Melbourne—Thursday, 3 December 2020

MEMBERS

Ms Lizzie Blandthorn—Chair

Mr Richard Riordan—Deputy Chair

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Mr Gary Maas

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Ms Pauline Richards

Mr Tim Richardson

Ms Nina Taylor

Ms Bridget Vallence

WITNESSES

Ms Ros Spence, MP, Minister for Youth,

Mr John Batho, Acting Deputy Secretary, Fairer Victoria, and

Ms Gerry Goswell, Director, Equality and Youth Branch, Department of Premier and Cabinet.

The CHAIR: Welcome again, Minister Spence, this time for consideration of the youth portfolio. Again we have 5 minutes allocated for a presentation. This will be followed by questions from the committee.

Ms SPENCE: Thank you, Chair, and before I begin I would again like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we are meeting and pay respect to elders past, present and emerging. Can I thank you, Chair, and the committee for the opportunity to present on the youth portfolio.

Visual presentation.

Ms SPENCE: My portfolio is focused on ensuring that young people have a say on the issues that affect their lives and futures by elevating their diverse voices and actively involving them in decision-making. Young people are informing a new whole-of-government youth strategy and having their say through initiatives such as the Victorian Youth Congress and the annual Youth Parliament. Young people's participation in our community continues to be facilitated through activities such as Victorian Youth Week, scouts and girl guides, despite the challenges that COVID-19 has presented.

Over the last five years this government has more than doubled its investment in the portfolio to support young people who experience disadvantage and who are at greater risk of disengagement. Our investment is demonstrated here with a record \$34.7 million allocated to the youth portfolio in 2020—21. This budget commits \$11.6 million to continue our targeted place-based initiatives which work to support young people who need it most, and it recognises that setting our young people up for success has never been more important.

We are continuing funding for six community support groups. The CSGs were designed in partnership with local African and Muslim communities to provide direct supports and interventions for individuals and families. Additional funding will grow the work of two CSGs in Dandenong/Casey and Brimbank/Melton and extend services into Cardinia. I am also pleased that we are expanding the Le Mana Pasifika Project, which offers education and mental health support, cultural activities and mentoring for young Pacific Islander people. Both programs build protective factors around vulnerable young people, giving them a sense of identity and belonging to nurture their growth and prevent antisocial behaviour.

We are continuing to support young people in rural and regional Victoria by funding four regional youth offices in Warrnambool, Ballarat, Morwell and Swan Hill. We are extending operations at the Latrobe Youth Space, which is helping young people to stay connected in the Latrobe Valley, and we are continuing to invest in the Aboriginal youth mentoring program, which enables bespoke mentoring models to be delivered by Aboriginal communities across the state in line with the government's commitment to self-determination.

In terms of some of the highlights for the year, the government convened a series of virtual roundtables for young people to share their experiences during the pandemic, because listening to young people is key to our state's recovery, and I was really pleased to convene these.

As I mentioned earlier, the development of a new whole-of-government youth strategy is currently underway. This strategy is about creating real meaningful change and we are partnering with young people, the Victorian Youth Congress and our youth sector partners to build it. There is also the critical work of the CSGs and the Le Mana Pasifika Project in our response to the pandemic. These programs have provided everything from emergency food relief for vulnerable families to targeted health messaging to internet devices for young people to stay engaged with their studies and their communities. And through the pandemic, scouts have continued to keep people connected and engaged, which is why I was thrilled to announce funding for a further eight scout hall projects last week as part of the \$5.5 million commitment we made at the last election. I am pleased that their work will be able to continue through this budget, and I am proud that this government is continuing to prioritise young people.

The pandemic has rapidly changed many aspects of young Victorians' lives, from the way they learn and work to the way they socialise and engage with their communities, but many of the challenges they are facing are not new, rather a spotlight has been shone on issues that existed prior to the pandemic. We are focusing on putting young people at the heart of our work and providing them with the services and supports they need to be their best.

I will again close there, Chair, and thank the committee for its interest in this portfolio.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, and I will pass the call to Mr Gary Maas, MP.

Mr MAAS: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Minister, for your appearance today. I would like to take you to the topic of community support groups, and to that end I will refer you to budget paper 3, pages 116 and 125. I was hoping that you would be able to outline for the committee the work of community support groups and how they are providing support to young people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Ms SPENCE: Thank you, Mr Maas. Thank you for that question and your interest in community support groups. Our government really is committed to supporting initiatives that engage young people in their communities, including tailored supports for those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. The 2020–21 state budget provides \$7.74 million to continue the work of six community support groups, which are supporting South Sudanese, Somali and Afghan young people and their families through mentoring opportunities, parenting programs and family support packages.

These six community support groups are located in Greater Dandenong and Casey, with the South Sudanese community; at Himilo, in West Heidelberg, with the Somali community; at Junubi Wyndham, with the South Sudanese community; at Komak, in Greater Dandenong and Casey, with the Afghan community; in Melton and Brimbank, with the South Sudanese community; and at the Huddle, with the Somali community.

Community support groups engage with young people directly and they connect them and their families to activities that increase community participation, improve health and wellbeing outcomes and link them with education and training and employment opportunities. Through the CSGs large numbers of young people are participating in homework clubs, in social events and in sporting and recreation activities. These programs are strengthening the protective factors that help to reduce disengagement that can often lead to antisocial behaviour and youth offending. So our funding commitment will address a high level of unmet demand by expanding the community support groups' operations in areas of high need, including into Cardinia local government area. This is really important work. It is about making and maintaining safe and healthy connections in the community and providing access to wraparound supports for young people and their families.

It might be a good way of showing how the CSGs work with young people if I can give you a case study of how the CSGs have affected one young person's life and how they can prevent that disengagement from happening. This is about how a South Sudanese young person was linked up with the Dandenong-Casey CSG from an interaction with his parent. So his parent—Sara we will call her; the names have been changed—is a single parent with four children of her own and two that she has fostered because those children's mother was in prison. Sara was experiencing financial difficulty paying her mortgage and other financial obligations, so she attended the CSG and was provided with some financial relief to pay her utility bills. So this funding was provided, but through further discussions it was found that Sara was also finding it difficult to supervise her children during periods of remote learning due to her work commitments, which often happens when you have these—someone presents for a problem but you find that there are actually other problems. This is not unusual. In fact most of us will find that in our electorate offices when someone comes to talk to us—we find more and more problems the more that we talk to them.

What they found was that her 16-year-old son—we will call him Con—was sleeping in, not attending online classes, not completing schoolwork, and Sara told the staff that she was frustrated and that he was in need of mentoring from a male role model. She was quite concerned. So the CSG staff provided a range of parenting supports and advice to Sara, including strategies to encourage and motivate her children to be able to get up in the morning. Con was linked with a CSG online homework club to help him catch up on his schoolwork and assist him with his homework. He also started attending a mentoring session to assist him in making healthy and positive choices and to provide a safe space to share the challenges that he was facing. Recently Sara has confirmed that Con is back attending classes and the CSG is continuing to support the family. So this case study just shows the important work that the CSGs are doing to support vulnerable families that are having

financial difficulties, providing the support in that regard, but also young people who are facing a range of additional barriers to completing their education and the positive outcomes that can be achieved when that wraparound support service is provided.

Mr MAAS: That is terrific. Thanks very much for providing that case study. Crime prevention of course is an important element in all of this. How are the community support groups working to prevent our young people from entering the criminal justice system?

Ms SPENCE: Thank you for that question, Mr Maas, and that is very important. This really is a key focus, and that is prevention. So we do recognise that whilst most people do the right thing, some young people are drawn to antisocial behaviour, including youth offending. Indeed there are so many reasons why young people might engage in criminal activity, and that is why this government is focused on strengthening youth engagement and reducing the risk of antisocial behaviour. The government established community support groups to build social cohesion and support families and communities to curb and prevent youth offending.

The CSGs are an innovative, community-led and place-based approach that deliver programs and activities that improve youth and community engagement and address local issues and service gaps. The Victorian government funds six CSGs from the youth portfolio that I mentioned previously, and they work to address youth disengagement and antisocial behaviour that could lead to youth offending. We recognise that engagement can be a challenge for young people, their families and local communities, which is why CSGs take a whole-of-community approach when they are responding to and reducing antisocial behaviour. So the community support groups are focused on early intervention and prevention to ensure that young people, families and communities get the support that they need before antisocial behaviour escalates.

We also know that COVID-19 has exacerbated the challenges that young people are facing, particularly young people at risk of disengagement. However, of the young people that do come into contact with the youth justice system, we know that most commit low-level crime and do not continue to offend. The community support groups are one important way that this government is addressing the drivers of youth offending, and the CSGs do have a strong track record of delivering the services that young people need to get them back on track.

Mr MAAS: Thank you. In the 45 seconds or so that is left, would you be able to inform the committee in what ways the government has ensured that supports are provided to CALD young people during COVID-19, again using the work of the CSGs as an example?

Ms SPENCE: In the very short time that I have I can let you know that the community support groups that work with the South Sudanese community have assisted the community with over 10 100 case management requests. And those social cohesion community support groups which support our Somali and Afghan communities have assisted with 1328 case management requests. The six—

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. Thank you, Mr Maas. The call is now with Ms Bridget Vallence, MP.

Ms VALLENCE: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Minister and team. I would just like to pick up on something you just mentioned there, that COVID has exacerbated the challenges. I would have to say I think this committee has heard a number of times that youth have been disproportionately impacted by the COVID pandemic. Referring to budget paper 3, page 116, which has funding for youth community groups and youth engagement, and you have just spoken about that, Minister, there is not one cent of additional funding in the forward estimates. Why have you decided to cut that funding into future years?

Ms SPENCE: I do not know that it is right to categorise it as a cut of funding in further years. As you may have heard during my presentation, Ms Vallence, we are undertaking the whole-of-government youth strategy this year, and that is going to inform youth policy moving forward—and that is, as I mentioned, a whole-of-government youth strategy. So to fully inform future spending we want to undertake that consultation—it is going on at the moment—and that will be the best way to prioritise funding moving forward. So at the moment we are undertaking that consultation. It is going all across the state. We are hearing directly from young people. Rather than pre-empt what would be best going forward and prejudge the very important work of that youth strategy, the whole-of-government youth strategy—

Ms VALLENCE: Well, Minister, we have heard there is so much in this budget—

Ms SPENCE: the first youth strategy of a Victorian government, we are going out, we are listening. And rather than pre-empt the outcome we are going to do that strategy. And obviously that strategy will drive policy, and the budgets going forward will be able to back that strategy up.

Ms VALLENCE: This budget is full of many government initiatives that have not yet had a consultation process, so I do not think that that answer is satisfactory for the young people who have been disproportionately impacted. It is clear in the budget papers that it is dot, dot, dot—that you do not have anything outlined—and there are so many other initiatives for which consultation has not transpired yet that are in here, that have got estimates there. So as one of your first actions as Minister for Youth, to not be able to secure that funding, to fail to secure funding for those youth groups in the forward estimates—I mean, how do you describe that?

Ms SPENCE: For one of my first actions as minister to go out and announce the very first whole-of-government youth strategy—

Ms VALLENCE: With no funding commitment behind it.

Ms SPENCE: That would be pre-empting the outcome of the strategy.

Ms VALLENCE: Your government is expert at that. Your government is expert at putting things in the budget—

The CHAIR: Ms Vallenge, could you allow the minister to answer the question, please?

Ms VALLENCE: that have not had a consultation, that a strategy has not transpired and yet putting money in the forward estimates for that. But in youth, you have failed to secure that.

The CHAIR: Ms Vallenge, instead of answering your own question, can you afford the minister the opportunity to answer the question, please?

Ms SPENCE: I am very proud that one of my first actions as Minister for Youth was to announce the very first Victorian government—of any Victorian government—youth strategy, and we are consulting youth all across the state. They are at the centre of the development of that strategy. If I filled all of the forward estimates with expenditure across all of the issues affecting youth, that would be a pretty disingenuous youth strategy. To say that I have pre-empted everything that was to do with youth and I have filled the forward estimates with all of the expenditure, and then I went out and consulted with youth and said, ‘Oh, we’re developing a youth strategy, but by the way we have also pre-empted everything we are going to do’. That would be a pretty disingenuous program, and I do not think that that is a very good way to undertake a true strategy consultation process.

What we are doing is we are going out and we are undertaking a true, honest, open consultation process with young people at the centre of it. We are hearing from them right across the state. Just this week we have been in Gippsland. Today we were at Malmsbury Youth Justice, hearing directly from people who are in the youth justice system, and they were terrific in providing their very open and honest reflections about what they want to see in a youth strategy. I think that it is probably not quite right to say that all future expenditure should be laid out and that any development of a youth strategy should also come with very full forward estimates allocating all expenditure before you have even got any feedback on what your youth strategy is going to say.

Ms VALLENCE: Well, that is fantastic, but do you think that the 130 000 young Victorians under 30 that have lost work through COVID are in a position to wait for your strategy? Don’t they need some action now?

Ms SPENCE: I think that you are conflating two issues. You are absolutely conflating two issues.

Ms VALLENCE: No, there are many—in my electorate and the many electorates—young people who have lost work, are disconnected, have been socially isolated and are disconnected now. In fact you have identified that you are spending all that money only on six youth groups. What about all of the other youth groups around Victoria that are struggling to try to connect with these young people? There are 130 000 young Victorians under 30 who are out of work.

The CHAIR: Ms Vallenge, are you here for a monologue or to ask questions?

Ms VALLENCE: What are you doing for them?

Ms SPENCE: There is in fact a great deal being done to support young people who have unfortunately found themselves out of work throughout this pandemic, and I have indeed conducted a roundtable with them earlier this year and heard directly from them. It is incredibly sad the situation that young people have found themselves in, and we have in place programs that are assisting. Indeed the Latrobe Youth Space and the funding that has gone towards the Latrobe Youth Space is one program that is assisting in engaging people with local employment opportunities and training—

Ms VALLENCE: Can you outline some of the performance measures related to these youth measures?

Ms SPENCE: Would you like me to finish the last question that you asked?

Ms VALLENCE: Well, you have already described that to the previous committee members, so the committee has had that evidence received already. Can you describe some of the performance measures and provide—

The CHAIR: Ms Vallenge, you are not giving the minister an opportunity to answer the questions.

Ms VALLENCE: Chair, she has already answered the questions.

The CHAIR: Ms Vallenge, I am sorry your time has expired. The call is with Mr Sam Hibbins, MP.

Ms VALLENCE: She is just repeating it and wasting time.

Mr HIBBINS: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Minister, and your team again for appearing this evening. I want to continue with the whole-of-government youth strategy, which is a terrific initiative. Obviously the development of the initiative is one thing, but then there is actually embedding that within government itself and making sure that it is actually meaningful. Can you give the committee some understanding about how you might actually embed the strategy within government itself?

Ms SPENCE: Yes, obviously there is a process that we need to go through, Mr Hibbins. I thank you for your interest in, and obviously from your words your support for, the strategy. At the moment we are in the consultation phase, and I have been really heartened by the support from not only the young people that we have engaged with but also the community of interest around young people and of course the sector. I have also been really encouraged by the support of my colleagues across government. That has been overwhelming. That has given me confidence that as we move through this process there will be great willingness across government to embed the strategy.

Mr HIBBINS: Okay, thank you. Do you have a target for engaging within the strategy, development of the strategy—the number of young people that engage in the development of the strategy?

Ms SPENCE: I do not have a target in regard to the number of young people. At this stage we have done 25 forums, whether they be virtual or place-based. We were of course quite limited initially in that they all needed to be virtual, but this week we have been fortunate enough to be able to undertake some in-person forums, including the one at Malmsbury today. We have had a huge number of responses—850 responses so far—to the survey, which is online, and I would encourage you to promote that amongst your networks; I am sure that young people in your electorate and amongst your networks would be very keen to contribute to that.

There has been great interest. As I say, I do not have a target as to how many I would like to contribute. We are certainly promoting it as much as we can. There have also been some innovative ways of promoting it. Given it is a youth strategy, I was really keen to say, ‘Okay, this isn’t going to be by way of formal written submission only’—‘You must do a written submission in response to the discussion paper’. We have basically said, ‘However you would like to contribute to this is how we would like to receive your submission’. There have been ‘A day in the life’ contributions on TikTok, which we will then have brought into the submission process. We are encouraging people to contribute by—

Mr HIBBINS: Can I ask you a question, because obviously time is limited. Within the initial strategy discussion paper it says:

... THOUGHTS ON HOW YOUNG PEOPLE SHOULD BE ENGAGED TO MAKE MEANINGFUL CONTRIBUTIONS
TO GOVERNMENT DECISIONS ...

Do you have an understanding of what ‘meaningful’ means? Because obviously some engagement can be not meaningful, and there is really deep meaningful. There is actually youth making decisions about issues that affect them themselves. Do you have an understanding or an idea of what ‘meaningful’ will mean in this strategy?

Ms SPENCE: To be quite honest with you, I think that it has a different meaning for different people, and I think that you have almost said that. I do not want to put words in your mouth, but that can have a different meaning to different people. My version of what ‘meaningful’ is is that when you contribute to something it has a purpose. That is why we are, in our consultation process, making an effort to not hear from the same voices. The intention of going as far and wide and deep as we can is that I want to hear from people that do not normally have the opportunity to talk to government. We want that contribution to be meaningful, and we want it to be worth something. That is why we have said we want it to come in whatever form you want to provide it.

Mr HIBBINS: Okay. All right, thank you. Within the budget itself, were there any—

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Hibbins. I am sorry, but that concludes our time for consideration of the youth portfolio, and we thank you for appearing before the committee in this capacity today. The committee will follow up on any questions taken on notice in writing, and responses are required within 10 working days of the committee’s request.

The committee will now take a short break before resuming consideration of the multicultural affairs portfolio with you.

I declare this hearing adjourned.

Witnesses withdrew.