

# **PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE**

## **2021–22 Budget Estimates**

Melbourne—Wednesday, 16 June 2021

### **MEMBERS**

Ms Lizzie Blandthorn—Chair

Mr Richard Riordan—Deputy Chair

Mr Sam Hibbins

Mr David Limbrick

Mr Gary Maas

Mr James Newbury

Mr Danny O’Brien

Ms Pauline Richards

Mr Tim Richardson

Ms Nina Taylor



**WITNESSES**

Mr Shaun Leane, MLC, Minister for Veterans,

Ms Brigid Monagle, Deputy Secretary, Fairer Victoria,

Mr Anthony Plummer, Executive Director, Fairer Victoria,

Ms Angela Bourke, Director, Fairer Victoria, and

Mr Andrew Minack, Deputy Secretary, Corporate and Service Delivery, Department of Families, Fairness and Housing.

**The CHAIR:** Welcome back, Minister. I declare open this hearing of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee and welcome you back, this time in your capacity as Minister for Veterans. We again invite you to make a 5-minute opening statement, and this will be followed by questions from the committee. Thank you.

**Visual presentation.**

**Mr LEANE:** Thanks so much again, Chair, and thanks to the committee for affording me the opportunity to update you on the veterans portfolio, including the allocations in the Victorian budget 2021–22 and key achievements from the past year. The government supports Victorian veterans' wellbeing, recognition and acknowledgement of service through initiatives to support their successful transition to and participation in civilian life. This includes support for programs that support Victorian veterans and their families; veterans employment initiatives; delivery of commemoration, education, heritage and grants programs; support for the Shrine of Remembrance and the Victorian Veterans Council; and advocacy on national issues, including engaging with the commonwealth government to ensure veterans receive the support that they need.

The budget allocates \$8.3 million over four years to support the wellbeing of veterans and ensure their service and sacrifice is remembered. Victoria's pre-eminent place of commemorations, Melbourne's Shrine of Remembrance, will receive \$6 million over two years for updates and works. The works at the shrine include repairs and restoration of some of its magnificent elements, including lighting towers and maintenance to stairs, and upgrades to safety and public access, including improved ramp access from the lower to upper forecourt. A further \$1.3 million over four years will support the public sector veterans employment strategy so that veterans and their families who have left the Australian defence forces have the best opportunities to secure new employment. This includes access to appropriate education pathways. Funding of \$650 000 over two years to continue supporting communities across Victoria to commemorate the service and sacrifice of our veterans, funding of \$300 000 to support and strengthen the role of the Victorian Veterans Council through a dedicated website and the development of an ex-service organisation summit on veterans' welfare later in 2022.

This coming year the total funding allocation for the veterans portfolio is \$12.6 million. This funding will continue to support the delivery of grants programs, commemorations, education activities and veteran employment and wellbeing programs. The Victorian government delivers important funding to the veterans community through four grants programs: restoring community war memorials and avenues of honour; the veterans capital works program; the Anzac Day proceeds fund; and the Victoria Remembers grant program. In the past year there has been \$2.4 million allocated to 119 projects through the grants program. This includes an additional \$650 000 for veterans organisations to support veterans and their families impacted by COVID-19.

For last year and this one we have adapted the Premier's Spirit of Anzac Prize to provide scholarships as overseas and interstate travel tours are not possible. We have delivered ex-service organisation sessions to provide information about our Victorian government welfare programs and services. Victoria is working proactively with the commonwealth on establishment of the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide. Trauma. Mental health is a significant issue facing the veterans' community, and we will continue to advocate to the commonwealth to ensure it meets its obligations to veterans and their families.

I am passionate, and our government is passionate, about making Victoria the destination state for transitioning veterans and their families. One way we are doing that is through supporting veterans into meaningful education and training. In the budget we have committed \$1.3 million over four years to extend the Victorian public sector veterans employment strategy. In December 2020 I was pleased to host the first Victorian

veterans employment and skills accreditation round table. The round table provided an opportunity for the Victorian government to work with experts in their fields to address barriers that ex-service men and women face in transitioning to civilian life and in particular employment. Can I thank the members of that round table that have come from ex-service organisations, some TAFEs, some universities and also some family members of veterans in this important area. I think employment is a very important part of transitioning for veterans.

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

**Ms TAYLOR:** Thank you. In your presentation you referred to the Shrine of Remembrance. I will just refer you to page 47, budget paper 3, with regard to the budget allocation in this year's budget of \$5.95 million. How does this actually ensure that this sort of pre-eminent commemoration place very much close to Victorian hearts will be able to endure for future generations and really ensure that we can truly continue to honour the service of brave men and women who have served for our country?

**Mr LEANE:** Thank you so much for the question. The shrine is a very important place and a very sacred place to all Victorians. Maybe, Ms Taylor, I will outline the work and talk further about the importance of the shine and why this work is important. The work that the \$6 million will go towards is the shrine's facade and surrounding stairs of granite, which are ageing, and a number of repairs and restorations will be taken in accordance with Heritage Victoria's requirements. The brick stairways are integral to the architecture but do not meet disability access standards. Movements in supporting buttress walls have caused some trip hazards, and that will be repaired. And there are 90-year-old light towers—there are four of them—around the shrine. They have weathered significantly and they are also not in their original state, as in there are four light towers that surround the shrine strategically, and over the past 90 years I think they have been plastered over and they have been rendered over, with some work around their stability, whereas the original light towers' stonework is very similar to the building—the stonework on the building. It is an amazing building, and the architecture of over 90 years ago is just amazing.

So the work will go towards restoring those light towers to their original state, which I am really looking forward to. On accessibility, given that it is a heritage building, there will be ramps between the lower forecourt and the upper forecourt. It was a magnificent building built in a time where there was not a great eye to accessibility to everyone—and particularly elderly people as well. So these works will be really important to a building that has an amazing history. I was lucky enough to go down there recently—a number of times—and one thing about the building that a lot of people do not know too is there are a number of volunteers that love working there; they love the shrine. I met a really impressive woman that has volunteered there for 27 years. She knows a lot better than me, but the history of this building is that after World War I it was actually Victorians that fundraised nearly a quarter of a million pounds at the time to build this monument. There was debate and discussion around what would this monument be and how we would show respect to people that sacrificed so much in World War I in many ways—men and women. There was a bit of debate. It could have been a memorial hospital; it could have been an arch across the road. It was actually John Monash who really pushed for the current monument that is our shrine now. I would say it would be prime real estate now, but it was actually in a part of Melbourne that was a swamp. That was recuperated to be able to be used for what it is now.

We know important days when the shrine comes into its own, but the shrine has 200-plus ceremonies a year and different ceremonies to mark different events in history and to show respect to different groups of people and different nationalities, right through the year. And it is something that I think is a great thing. I think it is really popular, but not a lot of people know that. The last post will be played on every Sunday at the shrine regardless. I know a lot of people that turn up to go to that as well. It is a building to be proud of. I have had conversations with shrine management since I have been in this role about these particular works. Some of it really needs to be done, but a lot of it is really centred around making sure it can be as accessible as possible to everyone, which is not easy given it is a heritage building and how it was built.

So thank you for the question. I really look forward to seeing the work going ahead and, being an electrician and being a bit of a lighting nerd, how the work on those lighting towers progresses as well.

**Ms TAYLOR:** Excellent. And just on that point of accessibility, could you enlighten how the additional \$5.95 million has enhanced other investments that our government has already put into the shrine to ensure that these commemorative events are accessible to as many as possible on all levels?

**Mr LEANE:** Yes. I think recent times have shown that we cannot say anything good comes out of a global pandemic, but I think there are learnings. And something that we learned is—we gave the shrine investment in recent times, last year, around improving their broadcasting, and they installed a number of different cameras. Even into their—they have got a small auditorium there; it is an amazing building. So they put in extra cameras and improved their broadcasting. We have had some events which we put some extra funding into as far as marking the 75th anniversary of the end of the war in the Pacific. What they are producing is spectacular as far as their broadcasting, and now what is happening is that some RSL branches may be in regional Victoria and some individuals are not in any condition to actually make it to certain services—all these services are now being broadcast on the shrine Facebook. And as I said, it is interesting with the auditorium. They will have a number of events there, and they may be just discussions around any sort of current affair—particularly in the veteran community, but it could be in other areas—and they are broadcasting them out as well. And it is interesting: speaking to some of the RSL sub-branches, they are having nights they are dedicating to actually sit around and watch these productions. I know they would love to be there in person, most times, but I think this is part of the learnings—that their events can be broadcast and many, many people can have the opportunity to commemorate remotely. And, like I said, there is no such thing as a good by-product of a global pandemic, but it has been a learning that we have had to embrace, and we will keep supporting that well into the future.

**Ms TAYLOR:** Very good. If I could now direct you to page 56, budget paper 3, I note that funding is provided for an ex-service organisation summit on veterans welfare in 2022. Can you take us through the summit and how it is connected to the work of the Victorian Veterans Council?

**Mr LEANE:** The Victorian Veterans Council spoke to me when I first got the position, and they would like to actually do more in supporting the veterans community. And this was an idea that came out from them. There are many different groups—non-government organisations and charities—that are doing some fantastic work in supporting Victorian veterans communities and their families. Their idea was that there should be at least a biannual event where these people can come together, share knowledge, network and interact—see if there was anything that they might be duplicating that they can leave to one group to do—and it will be led by the Victorian Veterans Council. I think it is a great idea from them. It is a group that does not get together enough.

**Ms TAYLOR:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Ms Taylor. Mr O'Brien.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Thank you, Chair. Minister, I would just like to continue on to some of the answers you were just giving about accessibility to the shrine, which we all agree is very important. But I would like to ask you therefore what you were doing about getting access to the shrine on Anzac Day, when the government said it was actively advocating for 85 000 people at the MCG but only 1400 could go to the shrine.

**The CHAIR:** Mr O'Brien, I would ask you to return your questions to the estimates.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** I did, Chair. In fact it is directly related to one of the pages from the minister's presentation, about accessibility to the shrine.

**Mr LEANE:** Look, Mr O'Brien, I understand where you are coming at with this. I really wish, like you do and everyone else does across the world, there was not a global pandemic. I kind of feel in Australia I really wish—

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Was the pandemic not at the MCG?

**The CHAIR:** Mr O'Brien, could you allow—

**Mr LEANE:** I am going to answer your question.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Well, I am asking you to answer the question. I know there is a global pandemic, Minister. It is a serious question.

**The CHAIR:** Mr O'Brien, the minister is happy to answer your question, which is borderline out of order. I would ask that you give him the opportunity to answer it.

**Mr LEANE:** Yes, and I promise not to give a borderline out-of-order answer—and I am happy to answer it. I think where you are getting at is that there was a limited number at the dawn service at the shrine on Anzac Day and there was a certain amount of people at the MCG. Now, the shrine put in their application—the shrine trust and the management put in their application through the COVID-safe framework—and they determined the number of people that they thought would be safe. And what they implemented and what they did—I have got to say, there is not a great deal of difference across the country. In Adelaide it was advertised, it was actually advertised—

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** With respect, Minister, there was a great deal of difference across the city.

**Mr LEANE:** It was actually—

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** There were 85 000 allowed at the MCG.

**Mr LEANE:** If you let me, I will get there.

**The CHAIR:** Mr O'Brien!

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Well, actually, no—

**Mr LEANE:** It was actually—

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** The question was: what did you do to advocate, given the Acting Premier said he advocated strongly to get 85 000 at the MCG? I am trying to get an answer as to what you did—

**The CHAIR:** Mr O'Brien, the minister is trying to answer your question.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** to actually allow people to honour the veterans at the dawn service.

**Mr LEANE:** Mr O'Brien, I am answering the question.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Via the Cape of Good Hope.

**Mr LEANE:** So in South Australia it was advertised that there would be fenced-off events in dawn services. And then that night—and I do not know much about South Australian football—at the Adelaide Oval—

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** I actually do not care about South Australia. I am asking about Victoria, Minister.

**Mr LEANE:** I think there was near capacity. In Sydney there were only 400 people who attended the dawn service, and I think there was about 55 000 people that went to the NRL that night. In Canberra, where the Prime Minister was, it was a fenced-off—

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Sorry. Minister, I am not asking you about the other states.

**Mr LEANE:** because the people organising these events, including the RSL and the shrine trust, put the health and safety—particularly the RSL, their members—of the community first because we are going through a global pandemic. They put their applications through the COVID-safe framework. I worked alongside them. Whatever they requested in those plans, I advocated for the outcome of those plans, and they—

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Did you ask for more than 1400?

**Mr LEANE:** And those plans—

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Did you ask for more than 1400?

**Mr LEANE:** Those plans were accepted. And I think there is a big difference between a ticketed event and a walk-up event when it comes to COVID safety. So the RSL and the shrine trust, they put in their applications putting, you know, their members' and the members of the public's safety first—no different to other organisations across the country, as I just said, and the answer to your question—

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Chair, on a point of order, he is just starting now, 3 minutes after I asked the question—

**The CHAIR:** Mr O'Brien, the minister—

**Mr LEANE:** I supported—

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** He has had 3 minutes, Chair.

**Mr LEANE:** I have got to tell you, I do not know why there was not outrage in New South Wales and South Australia—

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** We're in the Victorian Parliament, Minister.

**The CHAIR:** Mr O'Brien, could you allow the minister to answer without interrupting, please?

**Mr LEANE:** Maybe that is to the credit of the oppositions in those particular states—

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Minister, did you see health advice?

**The CHAIR:** Mr O'Brien!

**Mr LEANE:** that did not play grubby politics with a really important sacred date.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Oh, so it was so sacred we could have 85 000 at the MCG and 1400 at the shrine?

**Mr LEANE:** I have answered that.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** What did you do to get more people to the shrine?

**Mr LEANE:** I was at an event—well, actually the RSL and the shrine announced months before the event that they were not sure that events would even go ahead. I contacted them straightaway.

**Mr D O'Brien** interjected.

**Mr LEANE:** It is a matter of record—you can laugh, but it is a matter of record. I contacted them straightaway and said, 'Let's work out what we need to do to help you'. I was at an event with the president of the RSL months ago and said to him, 'Your CEO's got my mobile. Contact me with anything we can do to help you to have a successful—', and I have got to say: good on them for putting health and safety first during a pandemic.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** All right. Minister, you talked about the other states.

**Mr LEANE:** I feel sorry for the veterans community in Perth—

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** New South Wales had 5000—you just told us it was 400.

**The CHAIR:** Mr O'Brien!

**Mr LEANE:** In Perth they had no-one.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** You just said there were 400 in New South Wales. There were 5000 in Sydney.

**Mr LEANE:** Are you talking about the march? What are you talking about?

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** At the dawn service.

**Mr LEANE:** Well, that is not my understanding. There was definitely security and it was fenced off, similar to—

But I think getting back to—

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Did you—Chair, can I actually ask a question, or does he get 7 minutes to just waffle on?

**Mr LEANE:** I think the argument about—

**The CHAIR:** Mr O'Brien and Minister, it is very difficult to bring this room to order when people continue to talk over the top of each other. You are both doing it, to be honest.

**Mr LEANE:** I am answering the question.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** You are not answering the question.

**Mr LEANE:** Well, do not ask a question if you do not want it answered.

**The CHAIR:** Mr O'Brien, the minister is attempting to answer your question and you continue to talk over the top of him, and then you accuse him in the process of talking over the top of you interrupting him. It is a ridiculous circle that we are in here. If you could ask the question, I am sure the minister would happily provide an answer that we would all like to hear.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Well, my time is up now because the minister did not answer the question in 7 minutes.

**Mr LEANE:** I did.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** You did not advocate at all, did you? You did not advocate for the veterans while the government was advocating for the MCG.

**Mr LEANE:** Of course I did.

**The CHAIR:** Mr O'Brien, your time is up, and if you had not interrupted you might have heard an answer.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Well, why didn't you say so? You have had 7 minutes.

**Mr LEANE:** How ridiculous. I always advocate for veterans.

**The CHAIR:** Mr O'Brien! Minister! If I could call the room to order, please. Mr Limbrick.

**Mr LIMBRICK:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Minister and team, for appearing today. I would like to get an update from you on an issue that you brought up in Parliament some time ago, and you have mentioned it also in your slides today. I have since spoken to a couple of veterans, and they seem to agree that it is a big issue. This was the issue around how we have skilled tradesmen being educated in the military and their qualifications are not being recognised in the civilian sector. I am guessing that must have been one of the subjects in the round table that you were talking about. I would be interested to know what is happening over the next year to try and find some sort of solution to that to help these people get employed and get their qualifications recognised.

**Mr LEANE:** Thank you so much for the question. It is a really vexed area. I spoke to a veteran who is an adult carpenter apprentice. He said to me that you can be in the defence forces and you can be doing trade school as a carpenter along with trade school apprentices—men and women—who are doing apprenticeships with AV Jennings or some private group, and then you do not come out as a carpenter like the AV Jennings person comes out. You do not come out with the same cert III. It is actually quite a vexed issue. I think a couple of things, Mr Limbrick. I understand there is probably limited terms of reference, but I think in the royal commission around veteran suicide and mental health—

I think having a job, as you and I both know, is really good for your mental health, particularly if you have got a family. This has been an impediment. So with the work we are doing, we did some work with this round table that advised me it is near impossible to match someone's rank to a private profession. There could be a warrant officer class 2; that could be anything. So we were going along those lines, and what we decided to do is that we are going to bite it off in a couple of chunks, and the first thing we are going to do is we are going to produce a plain English document that we are going to take out to the private sector—we will mention this—but a plain English document which will outline the great universal attributes that people have that have been in the forces, but outline that there are all these different skills. So we will talk about all the actual skills, and then we will do some work on who they should contact, because I myself and others in the government want them to come to Victoria when they leave the defence forces, because they are absolute assets. And it seems a shame that we have got the situation, exactly as you have explained. It is a little bit unfair. I think it is a little bit unfair that they cannot come out with different job titles that match what we understand.

**Mr LIMBRICK:** Thank you, Minister. Isn't this something that we could solve by cooperating with TAFE, for example? Like, they could get credit for their skills and then do a little bit extra to get whatever it is so they can get their ticket in a short time. This is what it seems like, some sort of solution like that.

**Mr LEANE:** I could not agree with you any more. Now, we have got some TAFEs advising us. We have got some TAFEs on this round table. And part of it might be just a small component of a cert III or a cert IV, you know, and we have got our free TAFE system. If that can help, absolutely. We have got our public sector employment program; we have already hit our 750, and we will get more, because they are assets. But I am really keen to go out to the private sector and see if they can assist as well, because I would have thought if you are going to be able to get access to, you know, someone who is an expert in communications, IT, they have amazing expertise. I am hopeful that it is a bit of an education program that will go out to the private sector and encourage them just to snap them up, and then maybe they can assist in that bit of training as well. Thanks for the question.

**Mr LIMBRICK:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Mr Limbrick. And thank you, Minister.

**Mr RIORDAN:** Chair, just a point of order, if I may. Just for the minister's benefit, he seemed to be a bit confused on numbers at Anzac services—

**The CHAIR:** Mr Riordan, that is not a point of order.

**Mr RIORDAN:** and I would just like to point out there were 4200 in Canberra, 5000—

**The CHAIR:** Mr Riordan, you are out of order. That is not—

**Mr RIORDAN:** Well, let him correct the record, Chair.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Riordan, that is not a point of order.

**Mr RIORDAN:** I mean, the Minister made it very clear. It was 400 in Sydney before. I just—

**The CHAIR:** Mr Riordan, you have no point of order.

**Mr RIORDAN:** All the media reported 5000—

**Mr LEANE:** Well done, mate. Keep playing politics.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Riordan, could you please stop interrupting me. Mr Riordan!

**Mr RIORDAN:** No limits in Hobart, Minister.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Riordan, your rudeness continues to astound me.

**Mr LEANE:** There were no people in Perth.

**Mr RIORDAN:** Sorry?

**Mr LEANE:** There was no-one.

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

**Mr RIORDAN:** Well, they had an outbreak.

**Mr LEANE:** There was no-one in Perth. There was actually no-one.

**Mr RIORDAN:** No-one in Perth, but all the others had—

**Mr LEANE:** How did we know there was not going to be an outbreak from South Australia?

**Mr RIORDAN:** Multiple thousands at the others. Perhaps their ministers advocated a bit harder.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Riordan! Please, Mr Riordan. That concludes the time we have set aside for consideration of this portfolio and for our hearings today. We thank you, Minister, for appearing before the committee in your numerous capacities. The committee will follow up on any questions taken on notice in writing, and responses will be required within 10 working days of the committee's request.

We also thank ministers and officers who have given evidence to the committee throughout the day, as well as Hansard, the attendants, the secretariat and the cleaning, catering and security staff who have assisted us.

The committee will resume its consideration of the 2021–22 budget estimates tomorrow.

I declare this hearing adjourned.

**Committee adjourned.**