

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Food Security in Victoria

Melbourne – Wednesday 21 August 2024

MEMBERS

Trung Luu – Chair

Ryan Batchelor – Deputy Chair

Michael Galea

Renee Heath

Joe McCracken

Rachel Payne

Aiv Puglielli

Lee Tarlamis

PARTICIPATING MEMBERS

Melina Bath

John Berger

Georgie Crozier

David Ettershank

Wendy Lovell

Sarah Mansfield

Richard Welch

WITNESSES (via videoconference)

Argiri Alisandratos, Deputy Secretary, Disability, Fairness and Emergency Management, and

Gerry Goswell, Executive Director, Community Inclusion, Veterans and Youth, Department of Families, Fairness and Housing.

The CHAIR: Welcome back to the Inquiry into Food Security in Victoria. For this session we have the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing. Joining us are Argiri – apologies, I cannot pronounce your last name – and Gerry Goswell. I will ask you to state your full name and your titles shortly.

Before we continue, I will read this information to you regarding evidence you are providing for us today. All evidence taken is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and further subject to the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information you provide during this hearing is protected by law. You are protected against any actions for what you say during this hearing, but if you go elsewhere and repeat the same thing, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing. The transcript will be ultimately made public and posted on the committee website.

Could you please state your full name, your position and the organisation you are representing today.

Argiri ALISANDRATOS: Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon, committee members. My name is Argiri Alisandratos. I am the Deputy Secretary for Disability, Fairness and Emergency Management in the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing. I will hand over to Gerry Goswell to introduce herself.

Gerry GOSWELL: Thank you, Argiri. Hi, committee. Hello, Chair. My name is Gerry Goswell. I am the Executive Director of Community Inclusion, Veterans and Youth, also in the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing.

The CHAIR: Thank you all for making the time to join us today. I am the Chair, Trung Luu, and my Deputy Chair is Mr Ryan Batchelor, with Mr Aiv Puglielli and Dr Renee Heath. Also joining us on Zoom are Mr Michael Galea, Mr Lee Tarlamis and Ms Rachel Payne.

I understand we got your submissions. I would like to open up and invite you to make an opening statement before the committee throws some questions at you. Would one of you like to make an opening statement?

Argiri ALISANDRATOS: Thank you, Chair. I will kick that off. Can I just take the opportunity to thank the committee for allowing us to come along and make an opening statement and for accommodating us remotely as well. I am up in Albury–Wodonga today, so we appreciate the opportunity to be here virtually.

To begin, can I start by acknowledging the traditional owners of the lands on which we are all meeting today and pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging.

The Department of Families, Fairness and Housing has a lead role in supporting people, families and communities across the state to access healthy, nutritious and culturally safe food. Our remit here is to support Victorians, families and communities facing disadvantage and vulnerability to access food relief at a time when levels of food insecurity and demand for food relief continue to grow. The department delivers this vital support by establishing and coordinating regional and community partnerships, providing advice to government and implementing government policy, funded programs and services. To be effective, we acknowledge and work to overcome the systemic barriers to accessing food relief that some communities face, including First Peoples, recently arrived migrants, refugees or people seeking asylum. I am pleased to note that this committee has received submissions from multicultural and religious organisations as well as Aboriginal community-controlled organisations.

To deliver food relief when, where and how it is needed, we are prioritising government investment and engagement at the local level. This includes the new \$4.5 million community food relief program funded by

government. Through the local grants stream the program will fund neighbourhood houses and community- and volunteer-led organisations who are delivering proven and innovative food relief programs and supports on the ground. Through the coordinated grant streams we are increasing the system capacity of partnering agencies to receive, store and distribute food on a large scale.

Our work also recognises the importance of building strong and sustainable infrastructure to improve system efficiency and reach. This includes delivering targeted projects across regional Victoria to meet the additional challenges involved with moving food supplies over long distances. Key initiatives delivered by the department include supporting the operations of six regional Foodshares as well as the Regional Food Security Alliance with an investment of \$1.5 million in 2024–25. This investment in infrastructure, logistics and staffing resources has enabled greater collaboration and coordination across regional Victoria. I am pleased to share updated data recently provided by the Regional Food Security Alliance in the 12 months to June 2024: the alliance sourced and distributed more than 170,000 kilograms of food donations, worth more than \$2.48 million. In addition, in the same period the six regional Foodshares distributed more than 3 million kilograms of food.

The department was also pleased to partner with Foodbank Victoria in the construction of two Foodbank community food vendors in Ballarat and Morwell, funded by government and now operational. I was pleased to visit the new Morwell facility a few months ago with the department's executive directions board and see what a state-of-the-art facility that is and how important that will be to the community out in Morwell and beyond. With its statewide and national reach, Foodbank Victoria continues to be a key government partner, and the department provides more than \$3.3 million each year to support Foodbank Victoria's operations. In 2023 Foodbank sourced the equivalent of 92 million meals for charity partners and school breakfast programs throughout Australia.

Our approach to addressing food insecurity continues to evolve, and we welcome the committee's views and recommendations to continue to reform our advice to government and work with community partners. We continue to look for ways to support Aboriginal self-determination through the delivery of our work and to leverage the existing strengths and knowledge within communities about their own needs and the solutions that work in practice. I also want to acknowledge that there a range of other parts of government playing an important role in reaching individuals and families in need, including the Department of Education and the Department of Health. As highlighted in our submission, a series of shared principles are underpinning and guiding our efforts, with a focus on building sustainability in the food relief sector and encouraging even stronger partnerships across the sector, including between metropolitan and regional providers.

In closing, I want to acknowledge our valued community partners working on the ground, including neighbourhood houses, volunteer-led organisations, Foodshares and statewide providers. This partnership approach is at the core of how our department works, and we know it is essential to achieving positive outcomes for Victorian communities. I will hand back to you now, Chair, and we are happy to answer questions from the committee on the department's submission.

The CHAIR: Thank you for that statement. Gerry, are you happy for us to continue or do you want to speak? You are good. Okay. Aiv, do you want to start the questions?

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Yes, sure. Thank you for joining us this afternoon. As a sort of starting point, do you consider it the government's – particularly the state government's – responsibility to ensure that every Victorian has the right to an adequate standard of living, including having access to adequate food?

Argiri ALISANDRATOS: Yes, we do.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: And just following on, we have heard quite a lot through this inquiry process that there are many people in the community who are accessing emergency food relief for periods longer than a year, which is really quite distressing, I think, to many who have heard that information. Would you say that food relief, as one tool, is really a long-term solution in the context of a food insecurity crisis?

Argiri ALISANDRATOS: I think it is one tool. It is certainly not the only tool that both government and departments like ours have in our possession. It obviously crosses multiple layers of government and the efforts across multiple layers of government. The Commonwealth has a role to play in this, just as the state government also has a role to play. Income support and a whole range of other programs that are provided by

the Commonwealth are crucially important, and the policy settings that the Commonwealth is responsible for are crucially important. In the same way, the state and its bureaucracies engage and provide policy and programs to assist those that are continuing to have need, particularly in this environment where we have significant cost-of-living pressures that are being experienced right across the board in every part of our community but particularly felt by those more marginalised and vulnerable parts of our community as well, and that is where our focus clearly needs to be.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. I would just like to hear a bit more. In your view what has the state government done to actually address the root causes of food insecurity?

Argiri ALISANDRATOS: There are probably a number of things. I think there are certainly a range of programs that the state engages and provides. Our food relief investments on behalf of the state are a critical source of support. Our funding of community infrastructure – be it neighbourhood houses or volunteer-based organisations, who on the ground are supporting those communities and providing food relief and assistance to those communities – is a significantly important investment and support that the state is providing to those communities. We have a range of large-, medium- and small-sized food relief organisations that are providing this level of support – funded by government and coordinated through a range of mechanisms, including our role in that – and these investments, these initiatives, are fundamentally important to how we reach and provide that food relief to our communities in need and members of our community that are in need. Gerry, can I throw to you and see if there is anything else that you want to supplement with?

Gerry GOSWELL: Thank you, Argiri. I think it is a really good question. My team and I have been listening to your hearings from the last couple of days, and it has been really interesting and helpful to hear the really broad diversity of issues that organisations have raised as drivers of food insecurity. We know the evidence tells us and the research tells us that food insecurity rarely happens in isolation. So the work that is happening across government to ensure that people and communities have access to the critical services and supports that they need to live a healthy, happy and thriving life are absolutely all part of the work that contributes to creating a food-secure state. I would point to the work, for example, outside of my specific portfolio in the housing portfolio through Homes Victoria playing a critical role, particularly in the provision of social and affordable housing. I know that you as a committee have heard from people who have talked about housing affordability as a critical issue and a critical driver of cost pressures for households. I think what you have heard and I think what we have seen in our work as well is that there is an interconnected set of work across government that happens to make sure that households, individuals, families and communities have access to the support and services that they need to build a healthy and happy life.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Aiv. Renee.

Renee HEATH: My questions have all been answered.

The CHAIR: Okay. Michael, do you have any questions? Or Lee?

Michael GALEA: Yes. G'day. Thank you for joining us, both. I would just like to ask you – now, I realise that this is something that is probably a little bit more in the space of your colleagues in the Department of Education, but a significant announcement earlier this year in the budget was around the expansion of the government's school breakfast clubs program by now offering of that to every government school, which is going to be terrific to see. It is probably stating the obvious, but we know that it is hard to learn on an empty stomach, and this is going to make a very big difference. We have heard from different witnesses about the impacts of these and similar programs, but I am wondering if either of you have any perspectives on what sort of impact this investment will have.

Gerry GOSWELL: Thank you, Mr Galea. I am happy to speak to that. We have consulted quite closely and continue to work quite closely with our colleagues in the Department of Education, and we have reflected that in our submission to the committee. You are right that the Department of Education is responsible for managing the government's school breakfast clubs program, and there was the incredibly exciting announcement through the state budget earlier this year that that program will be expanded to all government schools who choose to participate. At the moment, as the committee might be aware, there are a thousand

schools already participating in the program, and this will open it up to all remaining government schools who choose to take it up.

I think in terms of the impact that the expansion will have and why it is necessary, I know that you and the committee have heard from a number of witnesses who have spoken to that. I also note that, for example, VCOSS in its submission highlighted the importance of using schools as a key universal platform to reach families and children and young people who need it most. What this expansion will do is it will allow an estimated up to 200,000 additional students to gain access to school breakfast clubs, and that will build on the approximately 400,000 students who already have access to the program. So it is sort of another 50 per cent on top of what we are already seeing in terms of students who will be able to access the program.

I think a couple other points that it is helpful to make about this really critical program is that it is a universal program, so I think what it does really well, Mr Galea, is it does not look to stigmatise families or children and young people who may be struggling. It may not always be obvious to their peers or school staff that they need that extra support. The school breakfast clubs program is available to all students in the school, and I think that that is one of the key markers of this program – that it is a universal program through the school system. The expanded program will see 150 additional schools invited to join the program by June next year, with schools on a waitlist prioritised for 2024, and then all remaining schools will be invited to join from June next year. So that will mean that from 2026 every Victorian school will be able to access the program.

Michael GALEA: Fantastic, thank you. I was actually going to ask – and you have pretty much answered that – about the question of universality. We heard very strongly from witnesses yesterday about the importance of removing that stigma of being seen as the child or the recipient who needs the free school meal as opposed to one who can just benefit from it more generally. That was very strong feedback that we heard as well. Again, I realise it is probably more a Department of Education question, but is there any other particular feedback you have heard from schools who have participated in these programs on the sort of differences that they have made?

Gerry GOSWELL: Yes. Thank you, Mr Galea. It is, as you say, the Department of Education, but they have provided us with some information as we collectively thought the committee would be quite interested in this important program.

I think probably two additional points it is helpful to note are around that flexibility that schools are afforded to make sure that the program works at a local level. So while the program is delivered in partnership with Foodbank Victoria, which gives it the statewide reach and consistency that we need, it actually does still afford a local level of flexibility, and the program design can be tailored to suit the needs of the individual schools. School coordinators work closely with each school to find out what the best delivery model is for them. That might include a cafe-style service or a grab-and-go service, and the model can be adapted over time as well depending on school and community need. I would think that is a pretty important piece of feedback we have had in terms of what is working well and how do we make it work for schools.

The second piece of feedback, Mr Galea, that I think is helpful to highlight is the name is possibly slightly misleading in that it is not limited to breakfast alone. I know again that this committee has heard that the need does not stop just when students walk through the door at the start of the day. Teachers may observe that young people are not coming to school with lunch, for example, and I think it is important to note for this committee that the program does deliver free healthy breakfasts as well as lunch, snacks and take-home food packs for students experiencing disadvantage or financial strain. In addition, some schools also offer cooking classes as part of the program, and that is really designed to help build food literacy skills. I know again as a committee you have heard quite a bit about healthy food and that being a sort of critical component of this work. We hear positive feedback about the flexibility to adapt that cooking class model to help young people and children from a pretty early age build the skills to prepare healthy and nutritious meals at home.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. It is really good to hear, especially about that adaptability and taking those lessons and working with schools to make sure it actually works for them, and it is especially good to hear that it is valuable for lunchtimes as well.

Gerry GOSWELL: Yes. We just know that every school is individual and unique, and I think the education department works really closely with Foodbank to make sure that the program can be adaptable while providing enough statewide consistency.

Michael GALEA: All right. Thank you. Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Michael. I might just continue on that, if I could, Gerry. I think the program is fantastic and actually covers statewide. With food insecurity, that affects all classes no matter what socio-economic background you have – it affects everybody throughout the state. You said the program assists all government schools. I was wondering, have you considered looking into approaching multifaith schools, Catholic schools and independent schools in Victoria, as all Victorians are affected. I was wondering if the department had considered that, since we are joining in partnership with Foodbank. Have we considered looking to those sorts of schools as well?

Gerry GOSWELL: I am not aware that that has been considered, but I understand that the government has at this point funded all government schools. That is not to preclude any future decisions of government of course, but at this stage, the program is limited to government schools. I think, as you say, through DFFH, through our department where Argiri and I work, we do not have those boundaries I suppose. So families whose students may be in non-government schools, faith-based schools – I am thinking low-fee non-government schools, for example – they certainly have access to the broader set of supports that our department funds outside of the school system. There would not be sort of that boundary. I think a really good example is neighbourhood houses. Our department funds more than 400 across the state. We know neighbourhood houses are basically in every community. They are accessible to everyone, and they are playing a really key role in delivery of food relief. We know that the data tells us, and I know you have had a submission from Neighbourhood Houses Victoria, that a significant number of neighbourhood houses are delivering, and we are looking to kind of boost our support for them through the current community food relief program that is open now. I guess in our work in DFFH we do not have some of those limitations versus the kind of boundaries that are currently around the school breakfast clubs program.

The CHAIR: That is fantastic to not have this limitation. Have you ever considered contacting or communicating with the Department of Education on whether they would actually open it up, because it does reach the majority of Victorians who are experiencing the same food insecurity as their neighbours? I was wondering if you were considering possibly contacting the Department of Education and possibly considering getting them to open up to the rest of the schools in Victoria, to offer it to all Victorians, not just those in government schools.

Gerry GOSWELL: Thank you, Chair, for that question. We would absolutely be happy to pass that feedback from the committee back to our colleagues in the Department of Education.

The CHAIR: Thank you. We have heard evidence that there are various organisations within regional hubs doing great work in relation to food relief and acquiring food. Also, we had councils that spoke today about having food hubs, and for those that do not, and they require transportation to access the food. In the regions they have issues getting transportation as well. Has the department ever considered looking to assist them in that way? I think that they are struggling in relation to transportation and accessibility of the food, because the food is there at the various hubs; it is just accessibility, that is all.

Gerry GOSWELL: Thank you, Chair. That is something that we also hear through our community providers. I think what I would draw your attention to is our work with the regional food security alliance, which is an alliance of food hubs across the state, and also working in partnership with some of the big providers, the big food providers. What that alliance can do is actually help hook up different hubs and different communities where there might be excess food available and assist with exactly that – dealing with any bottlenecks, for example, or any logistical challenges between locations. That model through the regional food security alliance has proven to be quite successful, and we are working really closely with them to understand and gather that intel from all the hubs that they work with across the state to understand where some of those pressure points and demands still are. We are, as Argiri noted in his opening statement, providing \$1.5 million in this financial year through our department to the regional food security alliance and the six food shares that they work with for exactly that purpose, I guess – to try and work in a more networked way. Then each of those hubs has the operational capacity that they need with the additional funding we provide to be able to work in a

bit of a hub-and-spoke model out into their local communities. We have seen that work really well in Geelong, in Shepparton and in other critical parts of the state.

The CHAIR: Thank you. From all the submissions and from the last two days we are definitely getting more information to understand what is going on and to put more into recommendations down the track. Just in relation to the metro food hub, accessibility is not always great for those in the regions in relation to people having access to the metro one. Has the department focused on looking more into a regional one to assist those with accessibility to food relief?

Gerry GOSWELL: It is a really good question. Certainly our investment in the six regional Foodshares and the two Foodbank community food centres in Morwell and Ballarat – those eight locations have been in the regions. The rationale for that, Chair, has really been, linking back to your previous question, the distance that is required for people and for community partners to travel to get access to the food they need. So that is really what has underpinned it, as well as the data that has shown that areas in the regions are doing it particularly tough. Those logistics and the distance that needs to be covered are part of the rationale for investment in the regions. Having said that, our department does have an ongoing relationship with Foodbank Victoria and their hub is metro located, just in the west of Melbourne. We provide ongoing support of \$3.3 million per annum to Foodbank Victoria. Foodbank is a significant distributor, for example, to neighbourhood houses, who then are able to tap into Foodbank as a hub and take the food out into communities, because obviously not everyone is able to travel to a single hub location even in Melbourne. I think the other point that it would be worth making for your information is our community food relief grants that are currently open are statewide, and we will absolutely be looking at a geographical overlay with that. What are the areas of Melbourne that are doing it particularly tough? Where are the really great grant applications that are showing promise and showing demand for their services and supports? We will be looking to make sure as much as possible within the budget available that there is a good balance between both metro and regional projects that are funded through that program.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Just one more question –

Argiri ALISANDRATOS: If I can supplement that, it is really important to emphasise the network of infrastructure that we have, both within regional settings but also within metropolitan settings, and how we leverage off that regional and metro infrastructure to make sure that we get to the people that absolutely need the food relief support. That infrastructure around neighbourhood houses and the massive amount of volunteer effort that goes into supporting local communities and local suburbs is where we put much of our emphasis. So that is important, critical infrastructure that we rely very heavily on in terms of reaching the most at-need communities, both in metropolitan Melbourne and in regional Victoria as well.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I think the service you provide is fantastic. Just one more question: in relation to multicultural communities, I was wondering what the department has done in relation to communication in language, because I know, even though it has been said that there is higher demand from a range of communities, there are certain communities where there is stigma. They will not access the service where they consider that it encroaches on their culture. What has the department produced in relation to communication to let them know it is available and also for accessibility for those communities?

Gerry GOSWELL: It is an excellent question. We had a lot of lessons learned through the COVID-19 pandemic and our response, particularly supported by the work of the CALD communities taskforce at that time. For our specific service providers on the ground that we fund, we know that they do provide quite a lot of in-language information, particularly in those parts of the state where there are larger concentrations of multicultural communities, so I am thinking your Greater Dandenongs or your Sheppartons, for example. We know that those service providers on the ground do a lot of that work.

In terms of our work delivered directly through the department, we have worked closely with the multicultural affairs portfolio in the development of the community food relief program and we have provided communication out through the multicultural affairs newsletter that goes to thousands of multicultural organisations. We know, for example, that they are often that critical conduit. And we learned through COVID that often communities do not necessarily want to hear directly from me or my team in the department; they want to hear through their trusted connections and networks on the ground. So we have been tapping into our colleagues in multicultural affairs, and that includes the Victorian Multicultural Commission as well, and

making sure that we are working through those networks out to their trusted partners, community leaders and faith leaders on the ground so that that information can be passed on to what are often quite small volunteer-led efforts in community that are delivering that critical need.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Ryan.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Thanks very much, Chair. Argiri and Gerry, thanks so much for coming today. One of the things that I have been trying to navigate through the course of this inquiry is the scope of the Commonwealth's responsibility with respect to providing emergency relief, food relief, and the scope of the state's responsibility. Obviously this would not be the first area where a paucity of Commonwealth engagement in a matter of public policy or service delivery has seen a state that cares about its citizens have to step in. I am just wondering if you could help us understand a little bit more what the department's view is on the sphere of Commonwealth activity with respect to emergency relief, food relief, financial counselling – those types of services, but particularly about food security – and where the state's functions sit with respect to that.

Argiri ALISANDRATOS: Thank you, Mr Batchelor. That is a really good question, and I sort of alluded to that earlier on. The Commonwealth government plays a lead role in supporting Australians experiencing financial hardship. They have a role in that space. This includes clearly providing funding for emergency relief and food relief services to support those immediate needs, such as food, transport, pharmaceuticals and clothing. Through its food relief program, the Commonwealth funds key organisations operating across the nation and here in Victoria – such as Foodbank Australia, which we also fund, SecondBite or OzHarvest – to support access to a cost-effective supply of food items at a national scale, and providers receive obviously a whole range of donated foods from farmers and manufacturers and are able to deliver that.

We do have different roles between the Commonwealth and the state. The Commonwealth government sets up overarching national policies and frameworks that address food insecurity, and these are often focusing on broad economic and social factors that impact household access to food and other critical items. In alignment with this, the Commonwealth holds primary responsibility for social welfare programs, employment programs and supports, which also have a strong link to household food security, such as welfare payment subsidies and grants in community initiatives. The federal welfare programs, such as JobSeeker, youth allowance and family tax benefits, play a critical role in providing financial support to individuals and families, which can impact their ability to access affordable and sufficient food.

The Victorian government directly funds and supports food services statewide and local programs and services, such as some of the food relief organisations that we have been talking about, the education programs and the neighbourhood house investments that we have been making. The Victorian government also implements regional programs that address food insecurity in specific areas of Victoria, recognising that needs do vary between metropolitan and regional areas. Victoria also engages in our public health campaigns and educational programs to really lift awareness about nutrition and food security.

There is obviously some overlap in funding streams, as the Commonwealth and Victorian governments both fund some of our larger sector organisations such as Foodbank. They are some of the areas that the Commonwealth has an interest in, particularly given the policy settings that are about income support and programs that attend to individuals and families, and of course we as a state are providing much more directly into those local communities and harnessing the evidence that we have from our local intelligence to be able to bring that sort of more locally based effort and investment into our communities.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Thanks so much. I am just about out of time, so I will leave it there.

The CHAIR: Renee.

Renee HEATH: No, I am good. Thank you.

The CHAIR: All good. Any more questions?

Aiv PUGLIELLI: I might do one just following up, because we have heard about neighbourhood houses a few times. Would we say that neighbourhood houses in Victoria are currently adequately funded?

Gerry GOSWELL: It is a great question. Through our department, through the carers and volunteers portfolio, we provide more than \$43 million annually to the neighbourhood house coordination program, which funds that baseline of workers across the state, and that is recurrent, ongoing funding. That supports around 400 neighbourhood houses, 16 networks and the peak body, Neighbourhood Houses Victoria. That is a substantial investment, and we know that that is really critical to the stability and the sustainability of the sector.

Of course neighbourhood houses, as many other community services and organisations will tell us as well, have experienced cost pressures, but there is a significant amount of support provided through the department to navigate that. The community food relief program that we are rolling out at the moment includes a targeted \$2.5 million for neighbourhood houses' food relief activity, and that is really recognising that the food relief work is kind of above and beyond the core business of neighbourhood houses but is now becoming really part of the core business for key neighbourhood houses around the state. Morwell is a really great example. They have an incredibly sophisticated program at the Morwell Neighbourhood House to meet the needs of their community. That is really what this additional \$2.5 million grant program for neighbourhood houses that we are rolling out at the moment recognises.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: I raised the question purely because of instances in my electorate, where I have visited them and they have told me they are up against it. They cannot keep up with demand. Would you recommend that this committee in its final report recommend further investment into neighbourhood house programs?

Argiri ALISANDRATOS: You go, Gerry.

Gerry GOSWELL: We would not look to pre-empt the views of the committee. You have heard from a lot of people, and I am sure you are forming your views. What I would say is that we are interested in making sure that the spread of neighbourhood houses across the state is, I guess, still right for the current population spread. We are conscious, for example, that there are areas of growth in outer suburban Melbourne, and that is a demand we see across the board when it comes to infrastructure. And social infrastructure, like neighbourhood houses, is no different. So that is certainly something that the department is actively considering in terms of: how do we make sure that that spread of neighbourhood houses matches the needs of Victoria today? Argiri, I am not sure if you wanted to add to that.

Argiri ALISANDRATOS: That was what I was going to touch on – that obviously with our state expanding and particularly our metropolitan areas where we have got growth corridors, there is always need for us to be looking at what the needs of those new communities are and how we look to provide this sort of infrastructure, this community infrastructure, which is so critical. So obviously it is a matter for government, but your committee considerations are going to be important in that regard, I think. We absolutely value the role that neighbourhood house programs play right across our communities. They are valued social infrastructure that receive significant levels of funding from government. We know that they are used by local community members and communities more generally. We have a tremendous relationship with Neighbourhood Houses Victoria, which is the peak body for neighbourhood houses, and the role that they play is to bring that sort of intelligence and evidence to us to inform future service planning. So we would be very interested to see what your considerations were.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Thank you, Argiri, and thank you, Gerry, for making the time and giving us answers to some questions we had for you. Again, your submissions and the evidence you have provided to us will definitely inform some conclusions and our recommendations down the track.

Witnesses withdrew.