

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

2021–22 Budget Estimates

Melbourne—Wednesday, 16 June 2021

MEMBERS

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Mr Richard Riordan—Deputy Chair

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WITNESSES

Ms Ros Spence, MP, Minister for Youth,

Ms Brigid Monagle, Deputy Secretary, Fairer Victoria,

Ms Nicola Young, Executive Director, Multicultural Affairs, Equality and Office for Youth, and

Ms Gerry Goswell, Director, Office for Youth, Department of Families, Fairness and Housing.

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

Ms SPENCE: Thank you, Chair, and thank you for the opportunity to present on the 2021–22 Victorian budget's investment in young people. I would also like to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we are meeting today, including elders past and present.

Visual presentation.

Ms SPENCE: Young people are at the heart of the youth portfolio's work, and I am focused on elevating their diverse voices and actively involving them in decision-making that affects them. That is why young people are overseeing the development of a new youth strategy for Victoria and having their say through the Victorian Youth Congress and the annual Youth Parliament. We are elevating young people to participate in their communities through initiatives such as the Engage! program, Victorian Youth Week, Scouts and Girl Guides. Our government has more than doubled its investment in the portfolio over the last five years and is directing support where it is needed most. Our investment is demonstrated here with \$33.7 million allocated to the youth portfolio in 2021–22.

This budget commits \$18.4 million over two years to continue successful initiatives that are engaging and supporting at-risk young people. We are continuing funding for six community support groups, or CSGs, that were designed in partnership with the local African and Muslim communities and provide support directly to young people and their families. \$2.4 million from this allocation will enable CSGs to provide additional wraparound programs, including sport and recreation activities, trauma counselling and alcohol and other drug supports. With this total investment in CSGs, our government is ensuring that young people receive the targeted educational, employment, wellbeing and peer support they need as we recover together from this pandemic. Our budget will expand the Le Mana Pasifika program, which offers education and mental health support, cultural activities and mentoring for Pasifika young 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 also investing \$7 million over two years to support youth-led local opportunities for young people to connect and engage with community life across the state. The budget will continue funding four youth sector offices in Warrnambool, Ballarat, Morwell and Swan Hill and extend operations at the Latrobe Youth Space, which will continue to grow and deliver youth-led activities for young people across the valley out of their new multifunctional home. The budget will also provide vital supports to Scouts and Girl Guides, and we are continuing the Aboriginal youth mentoring program, which delivers community-led mentoring opportunities for young Aboriginal Victorians.

In the last year, the government has conducted a statewide consultation to inform the development of our new Victorian youth strategy. We heard from young people across the state about the issues of importance to them and their ideas for what we can do to increase opportunities for them to harness their potential and be their very best. We are continuing to partner with young people and the youth sector as we develop the youth strategy. I am excited to announce that six Scout hall projects are now complete as part of the government's \$5.5 million investment in Scouting infrastructure, and these new and upgraded facilities are already being used by young people and communities.

The youth sector stepped up its support for young people during the pandemic, and the work of the CSGs and the Le Mana Pasifika Project was critical to ensuring multicultural communities had what they needed. These

projects have provided everything from emergency food relief for vulnerable families to targeted health messaging to internet devices for young people to stay connected. The funding committed in this budget is testament to their fantastic work.

I am proud that this government is continuing to prioritise the needs of young people as we recover from the coronavirus pandemic, and I am focused on making sure that young people have a say on work underway right across government and providing them with the services and supports they need to forge bright futures for themselves. In closing, I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge and thank all of the organisations across the youth sector for their tireless efforts over the past 12 months to support Victorian young people, and I thank the committee once again for your interest in this portfolio.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister, and I will pass to Mr Maas.

Mr MAAS: Thank you, Chair. And thank you, Minister, for your presentation. And thanks to your departmental team for their appearance today, also.

I notice in your presentation you spoke to community support groups and the Le Mana Pasifika Project, and I would like to start off my questioning around those items. Would you be able to outline the work that the Le Mana Pasifika Project is doing and how it is providing support to young people from CALD backgrounds?

Ms SPENCE: Certainly, and thank you for your interest in the Le Mana Pasifika project. Our government has a longstanding history of supporting young people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, and through the budget we are continuing to fund initiatives that engage young people in their communities, including tailored support for our multicultural Victorians. We are providing \$1.6 million over two years to continue and expand the incredible work of the Le Mana Pasifika Project to help meet demand, and this builds on our \$2.6 million investment in the program since it commenced in 2017, including to increase the capacity of Le Mana to support vulnerable families through the pandemic.

Le Mana is delivered by the Centre for Multicultural Youth, and it provides targeted intervention for at-risk Pasifika young people. It does this through direct group work with Pasifika young people in schools and local youth services and by building the capacity of local providers to deliver culturally safe and inclusive services for the Pasifika community. Its work is concentrated in the local government areas of Casey, Dandenong, Wyndham and Brimbank, and its focus is on addressing barriers that Pasifika young people face to educational engagement.

Le Mana also provides intensive support for Pasifika young people experiencing mental ill health, including suicidal ideation, and the program is staffed by youth workers from the Pasifika community, so it is providing employment opportunities for community members while also enabling stronger relationships to be built with those at-risk young people. In 2020–21 there were 26 schools that were engaged with the Le Mana program and there were over 2100 individual interventions and instances of participation across sporting activities, cultural events, homework clubs, in-school programs and mentoring, so that is a large degree of engagement there.

And there was additional funding towards the pandemic response, which has enabled Le Mana to provide emergency relief to Pasifika families, many of whom lost employment and were ineligible for the commonwealth government supports due to their visa status. This budget recognises the incredible value of Le Mana's work and the need to support them to expand their service delivery to meet that growing demand, and that is why through the 2021–22 budget we are allocating an additional \$400 000 over two years to help Le Mana enhance their positive impact with the Pasifika community.

Mr MAAS: Excellent. Thank you, Minister. They are doing excellent work, particularly in the outer south-eastern suburbs, and I am sure the Member for Cranbourne can attest to that as well. If we could move to community support groups now, what work are they doing to engage young people from multicultural backgrounds in their communities?

Ms SPENCE: Thank you again for the question. As a strong advocate for the South Sudanese community, I know that you are familiar with the work of CSGs in the south-east, so thank you for your ongoing interest in this area. I am very pleased that the 2021–22 state budget provides \$14.3 million to continue the work of the six community support groups, or CSGs, which are supporting South Sudanese, Somali and Afghan young people

and their families through mentoring opportunities, parenting programs and family support packages. The budget also recognises the vital role that CSGs are playing to support young people to recover from the pandemic and to remain engaged with their communities, and that is why an additional \$2.4 million over two years has been allocated for wraparound supports such as alcohol and other drug outreach, trauma counselling and sport and recreation activities that are going to really enhance the work of the CSGs.

The six CSGs work 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 in Flemington and Kensington with the Somali community. This year the CSGs have expanded their operations into areas of high need to meet the increasing demand, including into Cardinia LGA and another location in Melton and Brimbank. Like the Le Mana Pasifika project, CSGs engage with young people directly and they connect them and their families to activities that increase community participation, that improve their health and wellbeing outcomes and that link them with education and training and employment opportunities. The CSGs are organised and run by members of the communities that they service, which builds trust around the CSG model and ensures that the unique experiences of their clients are understood and that their needs are met. Through the CSGs large numbers of young people are participating in homework clubs, social events and sporting and recreation activities, and these programs are strengthening those protective factors that help to reduce disengagement that can lead to that antisocial behaviour and youth offending.

Mr MAAS: Thank you. You talked about connection to education as well as connection to employment. How are the project and the community support groups actually doing that?

Ms SPENCE: The focus of both the Le Mana Pasifika Project and the CSGs is to support their clients to re-engage with communities, and whether that is with work or with study or with other community groups and organisations, their programs help to bridge the connection between young persons and opportunities that get them back on their feet. So while the CSGs predominantly access young people through referrals, Le Mana directly engages with young people in schools and local youth services. Pasifika workers provide on-campus supports to local secondary schools, delivering programs and linking those schools to local Pasifika elders and leaders. By reaching vulnerable cohorts of young people within the school environment they are able to support them to re-engage with their education and to prevent further detachment.

Alongside this work Le Mana is helping to build the capacity of the local service sector and networks to deliver culturally safe and inclusive services for the Pasifika community. Le Mana has partnered with over 50 organisations, including schools, government departments, police, community groups and the youth sector, which has really improved the level of engagement between parents, the Pasifika community and local service providers. In the last six months alone over 850 families and more than 1150 Pasifika young people were supported by and involved in Le Mana's work, so that is a really great outcome.

By way of an example of the work that Le Mana does to link, there is a case study that I will just quickly tell you about at a Victorian secondary college school, and that was where a school captain, who I will refer to as J, had to leave school because his father had become ill. Now, this is the school captain. Dad had to leave work, so he had to leave school. The school got in touch with Le Mana. Le Mana wrapped their supports around and provided whatever support was necessary so that they were able to cover the bills so that J was able to continue to attend school. So he was able to do that, and he was able to complete his studies. The family was really overwhelmed with Le Mana's help, and the principal noted that in her 30 years of teaching she had never seen an organisation unite with other local service providers to rally behind a student in need like Le Mana did, so incredibly important work.

Mr MAAS: Terrific. Thanks, Minister.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Maas. Deputy Chair.

Mr RIORDAN: Thanks, Chair. Welcome, Minister. Youth affairs: Minister, I refer to budget paper 3, page 201. Why has the government cut funding to youth programs by \$1 million and about \$2.9 million over the budgeted version? Given youth unemployment in Victoria is currently 12.3 per cent—well above the national average—how do you justify this quite significant cut?

Ms SPENCE: The cut to the budget is predominantly a decrease in the funding that was being provided to Scouts. The Scouts and Guides funding that was for four years ended, and we continued it for one year rather than ongoing. That was the difference in—

Mr RIORDAN: So it is a Scouts cut?

Ms SPENCE: Well, it was actually continuing Scouts for one year rather than for another four.

Mr RIORDAN: Right. Okay. So I guess the message for Scouts and Guides out there who still have not got suitable facilities is they will not be seeing anything anytime soon.

Ms SPENCE: No, it was not for facilities. The facilities funding is there.

Mr RIORDAN: So what is the cut then—just general funding for Scouts and Guides, is it?

Ms SPENCE: Yes. The funding that was provided for Scouts and Guides was four-year funding for \$500 000 a year for four years. That ended, and we have continued it for another year.

Mr RIORDAN: Right. Then they get cut off?

Ms SPENCE: Well, it is—

Mr RIORDAN: But it is not facilities funding, it is just to help them run their organisations. So they have got to find that shortfall themselves?

Ms SPENCE: If it is not in next year's budget.

Mr RIORDAN: If it is not, yes. That is a bit of a tough message. Okay, so Scouts have copped that \$1 million cut to their funding. Minister, on page 221 of budget paper 3 none of the performance measures in the youth portfolio refer to getting young Victorians back into work. Why is that? There are a range of issues there, but none of them measure those types of outcomes.

Ms SPENCE: There is a budget paper measure that does talk about involvement in economic life, and there is a budget paper measure that talks about positive outcomes for young people, so not using the word 'employment' is probably—

Mr RIORDAN: So you are saying that that first one there is 'to be involved in social and economic life in their communities'?

Ms SPENCE: Well, the youth portfolio is not the employment portfolio. So the youth portfolio provides a number of initiatives that go to providing wraparound supports, protective supports and initiatives that assist with employment outcomes. I can give you a bit more information on that, but it is not the—

Mr RIORDAN: Well, you are answering what might be my next question actually, so you can put it together perhaps.

Ms SPENCE: Okay.

Mr RIORDAN: Of the \$337 million you are committing, can you provide a breakdown of the types of programs that you are providing?

Ms SPENCE: That will assist with employment?

Mr RIORDAN: Well, just generally in that \$337 million, is there a specific list of programs that you are funding?

Ms SPENCE: I do not think I am understanding your question, I am sorry.

Mr RIORDAN: So of the budget allocation to work with those youth engagement type policies, are there specific programs, or are they on a—

Ms SPENCE: Which ones are they?

Mr RIORDAN: I am getting a nod from Ms—

Ms MONAGLE: Sorry, Minister. Are you just asking what is funded through the youth portfolio?

Mr RIORDAN: Yes. Basically, what are the types of programs you have got?

Ms SPENCE: Oh, sorry.

Mr RIORDAN: Sorry, Minister.

Ms SPENCE: I just did not understand what your question was. Yes, there is an absolute range of programs. Did you want me to talk to one specific one that is going to employment assistance?

Mr RIORDAN: No, no. Have you just got a clear list that we can have just tabled or supplied on notice?

Ms SPENCE: Well, there is a whole range of programs. Whether it be the Aboriginal youth engagement grants, whether it be the Aboriginal youth mentoring program, whether it be the Advance program, whether it be funding that goes to the Centre for Multicultural Youth or whether it be the community support groups and associated activities, the Empower Youth program, the Engage! program, the FReeZA program, Girl Guides, the Victorian youth program, the Youth Press Gallery program, the Youth Week, the Wakakirri—

Mr RIORDAN: Can you provide that on notice for us—that list—Minister?

Ms SPENCE: I can provide you with some information on notice of a list of programs that are provided.

Mr RIORDAN: Thank you. Moving on to the Scout issue that you touched on earlier, the table on page 221 refers to the Scout hall capital program, which you have said is a different program to the one you have cut. In your media release you said that this program would cost \$5.5 million; the Scout groups are only receiving funding if they can match government's contribution. How much of that \$5.5 million has been spent so far?

Ms SPENCE: How much has been spent so far? So 11 have been announced to receive—I have got an amount that has been spent so far. Six have been completed. Another—okay, sorry. I will get Ms Goswell to speak to this. There is a range—

Mr RIORDAN: So there have been 11 Scout grants.

Ms GOSWELL: So, Deputy Chair—and thank you, Minister—the government commitment is \$5.5 million over four years. So we have paid out the first two years of that funding, with the final two years to be paid out. And so Scouts Victoria as our partner—as our primary partner in the delivery of that election commitment—is responsible for then tracking the expenditure of the funds that match the project management and the project planning time lines for each of the individual 20-odd projects that have been announced by the Minister for Youth, and—

Mr RIORDAN: So there is about \$2.7 million left to disperse, is there?

Ms GOSWELL: Each of the projects obviously are at a different scale, and that is as per the announcement that was made by the Minister. So some of those projects are small, some of them are entire new builds. So the six that have been currently completed were smaller projects, and the larger builds are underway. And those payments will be paid incrementally as the project is completed.

Mr RIORDAN: Okay, thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Mr Hibbins.

Mr HIBBINS: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Minister and team, for appearing this afternoon. Engagement in decision-making is one of the key outcomes listed in the discussion paper for the Victorian youth strategy. In terms of the budget allocation in this budget for the Office for Youth, have young people been engaged in making decisions about the budget allocation for the youth portfolio?

Ms SPENCE: We have been engaging with young people all through, since October last year, in regard to the youth strategy. We have had nearly 30 consultations, received around 1800 submissions. We have had them involved in the design of the consultation papers. We have engaged with the youth congress all throughout the process. They have been absolutely key to the entire design content of the youth strategy. That was the intention, and it remains the intention. At the moment we are going through all of that, and the voices of young people will be very clear in the youth strategy.

Mr HIBBINS: Okay. Just separate from the youth strategy is the funding allocation to the Office for Youth. Are young people ever decision-makers over where that funding is allocated?

Ms SPENCE: Well, through the youth congress they are constantly voicing their priorities, and we have regular meetings with young people where they make very clear what their priorities are. At the moment their priorities are being voiced through the youth strategy. That is what they are currently working on, and that is what they are addressing their priorities through.

Mr HIBBINS: Okay. But you understand the difference between consultation and voice and young people being the actual decision-makers themselves.

Ms SPENCE: Yes, I do. And that is why we have made them do the design and everything. Absolutely.

Mr HIBBINS: Yes, okay. Thank you. Just in terms of the youth strategy, how many young people have actually been engaged or given feedback?

Ms SPENCE: How many? Over 2000.

Mr HIBBINS: Okay. All right. And then what is the time line for the finalisation of the youth engagement strategy?

Ms SPENCE: Later this year. I would hope third quarter.

Mr HIBBINS: And then in terms of the final youth engagement strategy, will young people be the decision-makers in terms of what that strategy will be, or will that be a decision made by government?

Ms SPENCE: A large part of the youth strategy is to embed young people as decision-makers, to make sure that they actually have a role as decision-makers in government decision-making, so it is to embed that. That is one of the key components of it, so that is really key. There is obviously a whole range of other aspects of the strategy, but a key component is making sure that going forward young people know that they have a role in the decision-making of government.

Mr HIBBINS: Terrific. Thank you, Minister. Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Hibbins. That concludes the opportunity we have for consideration of the youth affairs portfolio. We thank you and your officials for appearing before us in this capacity today. 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 will now take a short break before moving to consideration of the community sport portfolio.

Witnesses withdrew.