

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

2021–22 Budget Estimates

Melbourne—Wednesday, 30 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

Ms Natalie Hutchins, MP, Minister for Crime Prevention,

Ms Rebecca Falkingham, Secretary, and

Mr Craig Howard, Deputy Secretary, Fines, Registration and Crime Prevention, Department of Justice and Community Safety.

The CHAIR: I declare open this hearing of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee. On behalf of the Parliament the committee is conducting this Inquiry into the 2021–22 Budget Estimates. Its aim is to scrutinise public administration and finance to improve outcomes for the Victorian community.

Note that witnesses and members may remove their masks when speaking to the committee but must replace them afterwards. All mobile telephones should now be turned to silent.

All evidence taken by this committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. Comments repeated outside this hearing may not be protected by this privilege.

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

We welcome Minister Hutchins, in the first instance for consideration of the crime prevention portfolio. We invite you to make a 5-minute presentation, and this will be followed by questions from the committee.

Ms HUTCHINS: Chair, can I ask where the clock is?

The CHAIR: Right here. I will turn it around in just a second.

Ms HUTCHINS: Okay. That is fine. Can I begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we meet and pay my respects to their elders past and present. I should say the traditional owners are the Wurundjeri, because we are able to say that now.

Visual presentation.

Ms HUTCHINS: So if I jump straight into the presentation in regard to the crime prevention strategy, I was really pleased able to launch this strategy last week, which includes undertaking all of the risk factors for offending, including unemployment, disengagement from education, poor mental health and disconnection from community—really getting down to the root causes of crime. And our new prevention strategy targets three key areas: empowering and supporting communities to deliver effective crime prevention solutions; enhancing support for people at risk before offending occurs; establishing and expanding partnerships across government and with industry and community to strengthen access to employment, education and sporting opportunities; and finally, building the evidence and focusing efforts on what works in crime prevention to deliver the greatest impact. This early intervention focuses on the justice system reforms, including the *Youth Justice Strategic Plan*, to create a spectrum of support for vulnerable Victorians.

Next, delivering crime prevention outcomes. In terms of this budget's commitment to deliver on our crime prevention strategy the budget invests \$19.876 million over four years so that Victorians are safer and feel safer, building on more than \$60 million in funding for crime prevention since 2016. The new investment includes \$10 million to engage Victorian communities to deliver local initiatives to prevent crime, and this will be more important than ever in the recovery from the pandemic. We will continue to work on what we have already started through our building safer communities program. And we are investing \$4.4 million to address the risk factors for offending and preventing justice system involvement by further supporting our youth crime prevention grants. The 2021–22 budget also invests \$5.475 million to continue and strengthen our partnerships with trusted crime prevention partners such as Crime Stoppers and Neighbourhood Watch and to create safer communities to help prevent crime. This includes a \$1.2 million investment to also tackle the issue of vehicle-related crimes.

Slide 4, by investing the \$4.4 million in our youth crime prevention grants we can ensure a range of projects across Victoria continue. Some of those programs had to change trajectory quite dramatically last year during the pandemic. These include Banksia Gardens Community Services Community Youth Justice Alliance in Broadmeadows, which connects young people to key services including drug and alcohol support, legal assistance, employment and mental health support—a fantastic service there. I was really pleased to visit there in April. Over 270 young people have received one-on-one support and 600 have engaged in prosocial activities through that program to date. Another program includes the Youth Junction's Youth Umbrella Project, which works to create practical, purposeful and sustainable employment and education and training opportunities for young people 12 to 24 in the Brimbank area.

Our crime prevention grants projects also include the Save the Children Out Teach in Shepparton, which combines a youth worker and a teacher to address barriers to education for young people with extensive justice involvement in Shepparton. Also the Youth Support and Advocacy Service Pivot projects in Casey and Dandenong, which provide intensive support for young offenders, including care coordination, crisis management and individual therapy.

And finally, continuing crime prevention efforts, new funding in the 2021–22 budget builds on crime prevention investments, including \$11 million for the building safer communities program. Over the last year we have delivered on a range of supports to Victorian communities in line with the directions set out in the strategy. We have empowered and invested in communities to deliver effective place-based crime prevention initiatives through our building safer communities program, and we have enhanced support and built partnerships to address risk factors for offending, including establishing the sports alliance and delivering five sports projects to engage young people and delivering initiatives specific to the Islander Pasifika and African Australian communities.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Mr Maas.

Mr MAAS: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Minister, for your attendance and for your presentation, and also thanks to your departmental team for their attendance this afternoon. If I could take you to the topic of the community safety forums which you mentioned in your presentation, and I would also go to the community crime prevention performance measures at budget paper 3, page 288, would you be able to explain for the committee how the building safer communities program will reduce crime and improve community safety?

Ms HUTCHINS: Thanks for the question. This is about building a place-based local component into crime prevention and looking at ways that we can engage local communities to address the issues that are most of need to them to build a safer community. Part of that is the empowering communities program under the building safer communities program, where we will work in detail with local communities to develop proposals for locally tailored crime prevention projects. To date we have been able to run forums across four different geographical areas, and we have plans coming out of the budget commitments this year to undertake more over the next 18 months. These are partnerships basically between the state government, councils and local communities to be able to drive conversations and solutions around what are the most important issues in relation to a safer community and crime prevention in that area.

Across the four areas, which include Brimbank, Hume, Melton and Ballarat, we have actually heard different needs in different areas. I know that the action groups that have come from holding forums in those areas to discuss crime prevention have been working through quite different issues based on the different geographical areas in each area we have held a forum. Unfortunately those forums have been virtual due to the COVID restrictions, but it has also allowed us to share some pretty raw stories from victims of crime. We have even heard from perpetrators of crime who themselves expressed some insights that many people were not aware of in terms of themselves being victims of either crime or family violence at a much earlier date in their lives. We also heard from local police and local principals around what the issues in the community were and also looking at what are some of the programs that have worked in the past. We do not want to re-create the wheel in every local area, so if there are programs that have worked, let us look at those as part of the solution.

I was really proud to recently be able to announce as a result of this government's commitment to empowering local communities on this front \$700 000 worth of funding for Brimbank to be able to work up their ideas and for Hume to be able to work up theirs. We look forward to more of that as we roll out these forums across the state.

Mr MAAS: Thank you. And what advice have we relied upon in getting to that point?

Ms HUTCHINS: Certainly we have worked pretty closely with our own department but also, within the department, the Crime Statistics Agency to have a look at where we have seen growth in reporting happening and also the nature of the crime that is being committed in those areas and also the willingness of the local community to want to come together and work on this.

I have got to say we have been able to partner with New York University, who have done a power of work in New York around this place-based approach in developing the tools and the resources and recommendations based on a local lens. They have had quite some success with that. They have been overseeing some of these forums for us, and I am looking forward to getting the reports back from them around their observations and how we can pick up on some of the learnings from their work in New York.

But for example, with these forums the Melton forum really focused in on exploring ways to build on Melton's cultural diversity to prevent crime. Unfortunately it was heard at the forum that racism and hate crime were very much high on the agenda locally there. The Melton forum found that strong community connections are vital to preventing crime and improving feelings of safety, and the community members wanted to be involved in crime prevention solutions to make sure everyone felt welcome. They also wanted to really focus on improving public spaces to make residents feel like they could have greater access to some of the areas out there that are not well lit or do not have good pathways and are not engaging. So that is an example of some of the work that is being done in this program.

Mr MAAS: Thanks, Minister. In terms of the selection process, I guess, how are the communities selected for the empowering communities component and associated forums?

Ms HUTCHINS: Well, certainly looking at the crime reporting data and working with our regional officers of VicPol and working with our own regional officers with the Department of Justice it became obvious that there were probably initially eight key areas across Victoria that had areas of concern with growth of crime and how we could tackle that with the willing community. Those communities that came forward very quickly wanting to make a place-based change were the ones that we trialled the forums with, and we got them off the ground. We subsequently established action groups, which have now met. They are working through the issues and they are working through suggested solutions for government to consider funding.

We will be looking at having a further EOI process for other councils because now that the word has got out that this is happening across the state we are being approached by a number of other councils to work together. But it is not just about councillors and council representatives; it is utilising council services that they deliver in this space, and also the safety committees that many councils already have, and engaging them and being able to, I guess, harness their experience, their connections and their feedback to work with local principals and to work with local businesses where we have had issues within particular geographical areas within those suburbs or regional towns—also sporting clubs as well—just to see what are the key issues and what are the best solutions locally that we can continue to work on. And having police involved in this is giving us great insight into what has and has not worked in the past.

Mr MAAS: Thanks, Minister. If I could move you now to the topic of infrastructure investment—the same budget paper reference as before with the performance measure outcomes at budget paper 3, page 288. I note that you recently ran a grants project with a specific stream for infrastructure. I was hoping you would be able to talk about the outcomes of that in the remaining time we have.

Ms HUTCHINS: Yes, certainly as part of the building safer communities grants we have a creating safer places subsection of grants, where through environmental design principles councils can make an application for funding to basically look at ways to make a place more attractive and more safe and make people feel safe. There are a range of projects that have been funded and have now been committed to through this process. We are looking to fund projects that could include, say, urban design principles to enhance safety and amenity or place-making initiatives that can increase community ownership and use of the location. For example, we funded Greater Dandenong city with a \$219 000 grant to implement a community-led infrastructure activation project in the Hemmings Street precinct. It incorporated some CCTV, some improved lighting, some improved landscaping and some community engagement events to bring people back into that area to promote the fact that the upgrades had happened but also that this was now an area people could celebrate and be a part of in the

community. I know that that that project has been greatly welcomed by local businesses as well. But the grants can also go to issues like poor perceptions of safety and graffiti management as well.

Mr MAAS: Thanks, Minister. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Maas. Mr Newbury.

Mr NEWBURY: Thank you. Thank you all. Before I ask another couple of questions, can I just pick up on the point that was raised earlier about the building safer communities program, which is on page 288 of BP3. You mentioned that there had been four forums and, did you say, two funding—

Ms HUTCHINS: Announcements.

Mr NEWBURY: announcements in two local government areas. How much money were those two and how many applications have been received?

Ms HUTCHINS: Those two grants were for \$700 000 each. How those grants are spent is still subject to the action group that is being formed in that local area coming and presenting ideas back, and they have to be in line with our core principles around crime prevention. So two have been announced and four forums have been undertaken.

Mr NEWBURY: Have other applications come in?

Ms HUTCHINS: We are starting a new EOI process going forward for us to be able to roll it out. That could not happen before the budget announcements.

Mr NEWBURY: In terms of forums, have you got any in the pipeline in other areas?

Ms HUTCHINS: Not at this stage. We only just conducted the Ballarat one last week, so from now on in we will be looking at suggestions from councils who want to come forward and be part of the program.

Mr NEWBURY: Okay, thank you. On page 9 of budget paper 3 the budget includes a total of \$30.7 million to support mental health and wellbeing of criminal offenders, and then if you go to page 88 of the same budget paper, crime prevention initiatives, the total line items equate to \$19.8 million. So there is \$30.7 million in the budget for mental health and wellbeing for criminal offenders and \$19.8 million for crime prevention initiatives. Do you think that mental health of criminals is being given greater priority than crime prevention?

Ms HUTCHINS: Thank you for your question.

Mr NEWBURY: \$30 million versus \$20 million, effectively.

Ms HUTCHINS: I would not say it is given greater emphasis—

Mr NEWBURY: Greater money, perhaps?

Ms HUTCHINS: Certainly our commitments over many years in the crime prevention space have been quite substantial, but we know that the root causes of crime are what we need to tackle. I am really proud of what the government has achieved and committed to in the mental health royal commission and the funding that has flowed on from that. It is not just about a commitment for prisoners in incarceration to deal with their mental health, although that is a big part of it, but it is also around diversion as well. I am sure you would hear from any police commissioner or assistant police commissioner that there is just way too much time spent by officers on the ground dealing with issues of mental health that are reported to police, and that is part of what we need to tackle.

Mr NEWBURY: All I was doing was just noting that more is spent on the mental health of criminals than in crime prevention—\$30 million to \$20 million.

Ms HUTCHINS: Well, actually in crime prevention we have spent closer to \$65 million over the years, so you are taking one small snapshot of time now—

Mr NEWBURY: Just the budget, I was just taking the budget.

Ms HUTCHINS: and you are comparing that to our commitments of a royal commission and the outcomes of that. We know incarcerated people have huge mental health issues—and many people also on community correction orders as well.

Mr NEWBURY: In that \$19.8 million that I referred to just previously, was part of that directed to Neighbourhood Watch?

Ms HUTCHINS: Yes, there was money directed to Neighbourhood Watch. I will just find out where it—

Mr NEWBURY: That is okay.

Ms HUTCHINS: Are you after the exact number that they have gotten out of—

Mr NEWBURY: To start with, if you do not mind.

Ms HUTCHINS: Yes. I want to say it is 1.5, but I cannot find it in my notes.

Mr NEWBURY: That is okay.

Ms HUTCHINS: Here it is. The current budget is 5.5 combined. I have only got a combined figure for Neighbourhood Watch and Crime Stoppers over the next four years.

Mr NEWBURY: Do you mind taking that on notice, if you do have a breakdown separately?

Ms HUTCHINS: Yes.

Mr NEWBURY: Can I understand: Neighbourhood Watch, and perhaps it is a departmental question—did they put in a request or a proposal? Does anyone know what the actual money is for?

Ms HUTCHINS: I can say that I met with them on numerous occasions.

Mr NEWBURY: Yes, I am not saying otherwise; I am just saying would you mind letting me know what it is for.

Ms HUTCHINS: Yes, I have met with them on numerous occasions. Part of the engagement with them both ongoing is to have them embedded in our local strategies as well, so it is both having them in attendance at our community safety forums but having them at the table for the ongoing work, because they have the actual networks into local communities that we want to engage to fight crime.

Mr HOWARD: They have traditionally received funding from the department that supports their annual operations, and in this year's funding we have been very specific about making sure that they are engaged with the Building Safer Communities program of work so that they are more closely aligned to the work that we are doing.

Mr NEWBURY: Okay, so they would be at the forums, for example, that you spoke about earlier.

Mr HOWARD: Yes.

Mr NEWBURY: Okay, that makes sense. Does the budget include any output metric on crime prevention initiatives? So we just spoke about crime prevention before, and I am just trying to understand: when we put money into something, what is the output? Is there a target? Is there an output measure?

Mr HOWARD: Each individual program is evaluated against the guidelines. So traditionally the performance measure under BP3 has been that every program is evaluated, but we have now got three new measures in BP3 that might provide some better guidance, we think, into the future about the expenditure. The first of those is 'Number community members engaged in Crime Prevention capacity building activities', the second is 'Percentage of funded initiatives that support local communities to deliver innovative crime and community safety solutions in local areas' and the third is 'Outcomes of Crime Prevention funded projects published within 12 months of project completion'.

Mr NEWBURY: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Mr Limbrick.

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Minister and team, for appearing today. I just wanted to ask a couple of questions about the Community Safety Infrastructure Grants. I was going through the grants for the 2020–21 financial year, and most of these are really straightforward—you know, lighting and fencing and things like this. I am not quite sure I understand the place-making stuff. Maybe you could explain that a little bit more. So one of them I was looking at was the North Richmond place-making project, and I think it is like a community garden. How does that help prevent crime, that particular project?

Ms HUTCHINS: Well, I know at Banksia Gardens facility there is a youth justice precinct there, but right alongside it is a school that is available for 15-year-olds located at that site where there has been disengagement with their local schools. I think they work with about 15 schools across the region, and kids that have disengaged with school can then attend that classroom for a one on one. Right alongside that is a garden as well, a community garden, that during various times of the day the teacher will get these kids outside and into the garden to keep them engaged outside of the standard classroom arrangements. I am not saying that is exactly what happens at Richmond, but that is the flow-on of why we fund these things. They are never just standalone in that sense. They are usually tied together with a range of, I guess, tactics to break down isolation and to bring people together, so that is why we look at those projects. In terms of the one that you talked about in Richmond—is that correct?

Mr LIMBRICK: Yes, the North Richmond place-making project by Cultivating Community.

Ms HUTCHINS: Yes, I think that included CCTV cameras as well, and also I guess the garden was part of the Yarra city commitment as well, but usually these things are done based on the recommendations of a holistic approach. Rather than just putting in CCTV cameras, it is about also bringing people to the area for a reason where once upon a time there might have potentially just been drug dealing or graffiti or dirty areas. It is to uplift them.

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you. Is there some sort of post-project review of these things to determine whether it was an effective use of money and whether it has actually helped lower crime in the area? Do we go back and review these projects?

Ms HUTCHINS: Yes, that is part of the department's work, and part of the commitment to the funding is to quite often, depending on the sort of project—if we are talking about an infrastructure-based one, it is not just at the completion point, we do go back beyond that. But for an engagement process like I have talked about with Banksia Gardens there are a number of check-in points that the department has with that. Depending on whether it is a service-based model or it is an infrastructure-based model, we will always look at how many people were engaged in the project along a time frame that is suitable for that sort of investment. For example, the bigger the project, the longer we keep an eye on the engagement.

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you very much. I do not have any further questions.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Limbrick. That concludes the time we have set aside for questions in relation to this portfolio. Questions which were taken on notice will be followed up, and responses will be required within 10 working days of the committee's request. The committee will now take a short break before moving to consideration of the corrections portfolio with you at 3.10 pm. Thank you.

Witnesses withdrew.