

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the 2024–25 Budget Estimates

Melbourne – Friday 17 May 2024

MEMBERS

Sarah Connolly – Chair

Nicholas McGowan – Deputy Chair

Michael Galea

Mathew Hilakari

Lauren Kathage

Bev McArthur

Danny O’Brien

Aiv Puglielli

Meng Heang Tak

WITNESSES

Ros Spence MP, Minister for Carers and Volunteers; and

Louise Perry, Deputy Secretary, Fairer Victoria and Engagement, and

Gerry Goswell, Executive Director, Policy and Systems, Fairer Victoria, Department of Families, Fairness and Housing.

The CHAIR: I declare open this hearing of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee.

I ask that mobile telephones please be turned to silent.

On behalf of the Parliament, the committee is conducting this Inquiry into the 2024–25 Budget Estimates. The committee's aim is to scrutinise public administration and finance to improve outcomes for the Victorian community.

I advise that all evidence taken by the committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. However, comments repeated outside of this hearing may not be protected by this privilege.

As Chair I expect that committee members will be respectful towards witnesses, the Victorian community joining the hearing via the live stream and other committee members.

Witnesses 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.

I welcome the Minister for Carers and Volunteers the Honourable Ros Spence as well as officials from the DFFH. Minister, I am going to invite you to make an opening statement of no more than 5 minutes, and after this time committee members will ask questions. Your time starts now.

Ros SPENCE: Thank you, Chair, and thank you to the committee for the opportunity to present on the carers and volunteers portfolio, including our government's investments in 2024–25. I would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land that we are meeting on and pay my respects to elders past and present.

Visual presentation.

Ros SPENCE: The carers and volunteers portfolio was established in October 2023 to provide a dedicated focus on celebrating and supporting local communities, grassroots organisations and individuals across the state who are making a difference. The portfolio delivers programs and policies designed to increase and support social and economic participation for all Victorians; create connected, engaged communities; and help make our state an even better place to live. Key investments and supports funded through the portfolio include more than \$56 million since 2020 to strengthen Victoria's food relief service and deliver more food to Victorians in need, more than 400 neighbourhood houses and 16 networks supported to provide a broad range of employment, education, social and volunteering opportunities. Neighbourhood houses have also been important partners with the government to help Victorians access initiatives, such as the power saving bonus. One million dollars annually is provided to deliver infrastructure grants for men's sheds and to support the sector's peak body, and 487 grants have been provided since 2015. We are continuing to work with Volunteering Victoria to deliver the Victorian volunteering strategy, a five-year plan to revitalise, reimagine and strengthen volunteering in response to the changes resulting from the pandemic. The portfolio also partners with community organisations to deliver programs and supports to improve the health and wellbeing of Victoria's 13,250 unpaid carers and reduce financial stress that can arise from their caring responsibilities.

My portfolio is delivering 57 commitments made at the 2022 election. These projects are well underway and are supporting a broad range of food relief providers, neighbourhood houses, men's sheds, volunteering support services and philanthropic organisations. We are funding more than \$43 million annually for the neighbourhood house coordination program. There is \$22.4 million recurrent annual investment through our flagship support, the carers program, providing around 160,000 hours of respite, counselling and support.

A further \$9.5 million each year to 2027 delivers around 100,000 hours of additional respite for carers, and our Victorian Carer Card program provides eligible carers with public transport concessions and a range of discounts on products and services through participating businesses, helping to ease cost-of-living pressures. There is \$7.4 million provided to community- and volunteer-based organisations across the state, delivering on the Victorian government's 2022 election commitments.

As I have said, we have also allocated more than \$50 million since 2020 to strengthen Victoria's food relief system. For example, since 2020 our funding provided to regional Food Shares has contributed to an average increase of more than 300 per cent in warehouse capacity, and between August 2022 and June 2023 the six funded regional hubs collectively distributed 2214 tonnes of food. A further \$10 million is being provided to Foodbank Victoria for new food relief hubs in Ballarat and Morwell, which are now operational and working with charity partners to distribute more food to families in need. Demand for food relief remains high, including in regional areas, and that is why this government is continuing to invest in food security with a further \$3.5 million invested through the 2024–25 state budget. This investment will continue the important work of six regional food relief hubs. It will also fund two new grants programs to support statewide food relief providers and volunteer-based and community-led organisations to help meet the demand for food relief in Victoria. The budget also invests a further \$2.5 million to provide grants directly to neighbourhood houses to provide food relief where it is needed.

To conclude I wanted to acknowledge that many of the programs I have mentioned rely on the generous and invaluable contributions of Victorian volunteers. Next week is National Volunteer Week, and I am looking forward to shortly opening nominations for the 2024 volunteering awards to once again be delivered in partnership with Volunteering Victoria. Volunteers and unpaid carers make a critical contribution to our state, and I want to thank all volunteers who dedicate their time and their resources to support their communities, their families and their loved ones.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, Minister. The first 8 minutes are going to go to Mr O'Brien.

Danny O'BRIEN: Thank you very much, Chair. Thank you, Minister. Good to have you here. We strongly support the carers and volunteers portfolio, but I have to confess to having a little bit of trouble finding it in the budget papers. Where exactly are the budget allocations for your portfolio?

Ros SPENCE: There is in –

Danny O'BRIEN: Firstly, I –

Ros SPENCE: Budget paper 3 –

Danny O'BRIEN: Sorry. I assume it firstly is totally within FFH?

Ros SPENCE: Sorry?

Danny O'BRIEN: Firstly within the FFH department?

Ros SPENCE: The total in FFH?

Danny O'BRIEN: No, no, I assume the total of your portfolio is within that one department.

Ros SPENCE: Correct.

Danny O'BRIEN: Right.

Ros SPENCE: Provided through two outputs: the community participation output and the seniors programs and participation output. In regard to the community participation output, that is carers, and in regard to the seniors program and participation output, 60 per cent of that is within my portfolio, equating to around \$36 million of the \$60.8 million in the budget.

Danny O'BRIEN: And the rest is – what, under seniors?

Ros SPENCE: That was the seniors. Oh, the rest of the seniors one? Yes.

Danny O'BRIEN: Goes to the seniors portfolio?

Ros SPENCE: And disability.

Danny O'BRIEN: And disability. Right. Okay. That is one of the questions I had. That particular line item, page 116 of budget paper 3, indicates a funding cut on last year for that line item. Has that resulted in the loss of any of your programs?

Ros SPENCE: Which line item are you referring to?

Danny O'BRIEN: Sorry, the seniors program and participation. It says there it is a 1.1 per cent reduction, but it is a couple of million dollars.

Ros SPENCE: No.

Danny O'BRIEN: All right. What programs are funded out of that this year?

Ros SPENCE: Give us a moment. So within the seniors component, the carers allocations are \$22.4 million per annum recurrently for the support for carers program. There is \$38 million all up, which includes \$9.5 million to deliver the additional respite for carers in this financial year. There is the \$2.5 million that goes to Carers Victoria, as the peak body, for them to deliver support programs, to provide information and to create connections.

Danny O'BRIEN: Is that per annum?

Ros SPENCE: Yes, and then there is staffing and admin.

Danny O'BRIEN: Okay. Righto. The disability services line item has got a \$12.4 million cut, which the description actually says is for 'people with disabilities, their carers and their families'. I appreciate it is not your direct portfolio, but do you know what changes have been made in that line item?

Ros SPENCE: I do not, and we do not have anything in that particular line.

Danny O'BRIEN: Likewise, aged and home care is not your line item. That is in the health portfolio anyway.

Ros SPENCE: That would be the Department of Health.

Danny O'BRIEN: Yes. Talking of volunteers, the government released the *Victorian Volunteer Strategy 2022–2027*. It states that:

Targeted funding will also be crucial to ensuring value is created by and for the volunteering community in a way that strengthens outcomes from volunteering in Victoria.

How much funding is provided in this budget towards that strategy?

Ros SPENCE: The funding for volunteers in this year's budget goes to assisting the strategy, and there are a number of initiatives. The peak body is funded with \$0.247 million annually.

Danny O'BRIEN: That is Volunteers Victoria?

Ros SPENCE: Correct, yes.

Danny O'BRIEN: Sorry, it was \$0.247 million? \$247,000?

Ros SPENCE: Yes. There are also additional supports that are funded and still being delivered through the \$7.4 million in the 2023–24 budget for all of those commitments which are being rolled out now.

Danny O'BRIEN: \$7.4 million last year?

Ros SPENCE: In last year's, over two years.

Danny O'BRIEN: Over two years.

Ros SPENCE: Yes.

Danny O'BRIEN: How much of that funding is left for 2024–25 and the out years?

Ros SPENCE: I will throw to Ms Goswell for that one.

Gerry GOSWELL: Thank you, Minister. Thank you, Member, for the questions. The majority of that funding was allocated in 2023–24 but a small portion was allocated into 2024–25, and the department is working with volunteer organisations where they need longer to deliver their project to re-phase some of that money into 2024–25, with the Treasurer's support. So there will be a continuity of some of that delivery even while the funds are expended in this financial year. We are working to vary contracts with organisations where they need more time to deliver, which means that some of that support will continue into the next financial year.

Danny O'BRIEN: Can you say how much?

Gerry GOSWELL: Given we are not at the end of the financial year now, we have not made final determinations around how much will be re-phased. I would say it would be reasonable to expect about a million dollars of that will still get paid through into next financial year – maybe slightly under that. But certainly the majority will be paid out this year, because we have made really good progress with our community partners delivering those commitments.

Danny O'BRIEN: Okay.

Ros SPENCE: Can I just add to that, given you asked about the volunteer strategy: as when other strategies are laid down, not all investment is directly from this portfolio. There are other investments across government that actually go to initiatives within that strategy.

Danny O'BRIEN: As the minister for volunteers, can you tell me how much?

Ros SPENCE: I can tell you the various initiatives. There is \$7 million dollars over four years for the Victorian SES for volunteer training, and that is also to improve core response capability and improve volunteer health. There is \$12.6 million over four years for the lifesaving services, including the volunteer lifeguards.

Danny O'BRIEN: Yes.

Ros SPENCE: There is \$1 million in 2024–25 for the VicCoasts volunteer program, which supports community organisations and volunteer groups to maintain Victoria's marine and coastal environment. There is around \$700,000 through the community sports sporting club grants program, which provides support for volunteers as well.

Danny O'BRIEN: If you would be prepared to place the rest of that on notice for me, Minister, that would be wonderful.

Ros SPENCE: The bell has gone.

The CHAIR: Thank you.

Danny O'BRIEN: You can still say, 'I will take it on notice.' It is not a state secret.

Ros SPENCE: I do not need to take it. There is nothing else. That is it.

Danny O'BRIEN: Oh, that was it? Okay. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. Thank you, Mr O'Brien. We are going to go to Ms Kathage.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you, Chair, Minister and officials. I want to just get straight into a question around food relief. You will see on pages 36 and 38 there is information on that there. The cost of living is really hitting people hard in Victoria and nationally as well. We know that people are having a hard time getting fresh food, so I want to ask about how these commitments are going to help families get access to fresh food.

Ros SPENCE: Thank you for the question. It is a really important question. As the Minister for Carers and Volunteers, I am really committed to ensuring that our government continues to provide support to ensure that people can access food when they need it, as well as where they need it. That is why the government is continuing to invest in support for food relief, and in 2024–25 there is \$6 million to boost food security right across the state. We know that many people in the community are doing it really tough at the moment with the increase in the cost of living, and that is posing a real challenge to getting fresh and healthy food on the table. We also know that many who are facing this challenge have not previously done so. That is why we have allocated more than \$57 million into strengthening Victoria's food relief system since 2020, so that we can deliver more food to Victorians in need. Through this budget we are continuing the support for food relief in the regions by investing a further \$1.5 million to extend the operational funding of the state's six regional food hubs. We are also investing \$1 million in a competitive grants program for statewide food relief providers and a further \$1 million towards a grant program for community and volunteer-led organisations so that they can strengthen food security initiatives across the sector. There is also a further \$2.5 million to support grants to neighbourhood houses specifically, to support the continued delivery of food relief services statewide. The government is really committed to supporting access to fresh food for those who need it, and through this budget we will continue to support regional, metropolitan and community and volunteer-led organisations to deliver food relief when and where it is needed most.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you. You mentioned in your presentation the role of neighbourhood houses in distributing food. Certainly they are doing a really important job around the state. A shout-out to Whittlesea and Mernda for what they are doing for our community. Does this budget have support here for those organisations so they can continue to deliver?

Ros SPENCE: Thank you for that question. As we know, neighbourhood houses are incredibly important in communities, providing that place-based social infrastructure where people come to connect, come to learn and come to contribute to their local communities. For many, their local neighbourhood house is also a place where they are able to easily access available food, be it fresh fruit and vegetables or be it those pantry staples. As the Member for Laverton would be well aware, the Duke Street Community House in Sunshine is a great example of this, as they host a weekly food relief market which supports an average of 110 community members and their families each week.

The CHAIR: Very popular.

Ros SPENCE: It is really important work. Similarly, at the Morwell Neighbourhood House, in the neighbouring electorate to the Member for Gippsland South –

Danny O'BRIEN: You have done your research so well. I am so impressed.

Ros SPENCE: they are doing an exceptional job, delivering food relief for the local community –

Danny O'BRIEN: Most ministers just go, 'Oh, it's in Gippsland; it must be in your electorate.'

Ros SPENCE: particularly through their emergency food bank, which stocks essential groceries, frozen meals, personal care items and even pet food, so that is really important.

Nick McGOWAN: What about my electorate?

Ros SPENCE: I was also very pleased to recently call in and see the work being done at Kinglake Ranges Neighbourhood House to support locals needing food relief. They are complementing their open pantry service with their community gardens so that they can introduce fresh vegetables and herbs when people are coming to collect their packages, so that is really important. We know how important these services are to the community, and that is why we are continuing to deliver strong support to neighbourhood houses providing food relief through that \$2.5 million grant program, direct for neighbourhood houses to continue their delivery of food relief services. This funding will continue to enable neighbourhood houses to efficiently distribute their food to local communities, continuing their really important work right across the state.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you, Minister. You mentioned some regional locations, so what is the government doing to ensure that the food needs of regional Victorians are being met?

Ros SPENCE: Thank you for that question. The government really does understand that the food relief sector is experiencing unprecedented demand, and that is occurring right across the state. That is why we are committed to supporting food relief to those in need, and we say ‘where they need it’ as well. And we are doing this through the budget by continuing to support the state’s six regional food relief hubs. They are in Bendigo, Mildura, Warrnambool, Geelong, Albury–Wodonga and Shepparton. We are providing an additional \$1.5 million to those six regional hubs. These hubs and the Regional Food Security Alliance have demonstrated flexibility and responsiveness to locals in need, and we are really keen to support them.

I was pleased to have the opportunity to meet with Cathie Steele from the Regional Food Security Alliance and Andrew Schauble from the Geelong Food Relief Centre to hear about some of the really excellent work that they are doing to provide food relief across regional Victoria. At the Geelong Food Relief Centre clients are referred through agencies for a food voucher system, and the food voucher redemptions occur at the centre’s mini-mart in Geelong. So they are making real efforts to preserve the dignity of those accessing food relief. It is being done in an incredibly respectful way. Each year more than 14,500 families use those centres, and that equates to more than 36,000 adults and children. So the breadth of support being provided there is incredibly important and highly valued. We know how important this work is, which is why we are supporting the regional food hubs so that they can continue their essential work helping regional Victorians when and where they need it most.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you, Minister. We have touched on neighbourhood houses and the food co-ops you were just talking about; what about other volunteer-led or community organisations? Are we supporting them to support their communities?

Ros SPENCE: Yes. Thank you for that question. Community and volunteer-led organisations are really critical to the food relief sector. They provide exceptional support right across the state, and they have those additional community benefits like volunteering opportunities and local food waste reduction. Through this budget we are continuing to support these organisations, delivering \$1 million for grants for community and volunteer-led organisations to strengthen food security initiatives right across the sector and across the state. Grants will be available to neighbourhood houses delivering food relief and the many wonderful community and volunteer-led food relief organisations across our state, who will no doubt welcome this additional support through the budget – organisations like OzHarvest and SecondBite, for example. Through SecondBite, farmers, retailers and manufacturers harness approximately 25 million kilograms of surplus quality produce each year, which is provided to over 1000 charity providers to support communities that are experiencing food insecurity. It is organisations like these that will have the opportunity to apply for funding through this new competitive grant program. We are really pleased to offer this support for the exceptional work of these organisations and what they are doing right across the state.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you. You went into some detail about support for regional Victoria. Has metro Victoria got additional support as well and the surrounding areas?

Ros SPENCE: Yes. Thank you. We know that there is a need for both regional and metropolitan support, and this government is committed to strengthening food relief all Victorians. Through the budget we are delivering that \$1 million investment for the competitive grants program, and that is for statewide food relief providers. The investment will support partnerships between metro and regional providers to enhance the coordination and the distribution of food in the state. We know that organisations like Foodbank Victoria are distributing over 9 million kilograms of food and supplies each year through more than 530 charity partners. That is the equivalent of providing over 16.7 million meals to Victorians facing food insecurity. It was fantastic to visit Foodbank’s warehouse in Yarraville and see firsthand the impact of effective coordination and distribution of food across the state, and I am really pleased that this budget will continue to build on our investment in food relief right across Victoria.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you, Minister. I just want to focus in on neighbourhood houses again. We know they provide really essential services. For example, in Whittlesea they hold fix it Fridays every month. I think they had 28 people last month come and get help from different agencies; it was really great. They provide training, lots of support for seniors and connection. We have a blokes breakfast in Whittlesea, which is really well received as well. This year’s budget has grants, you said, for community-led organisations. Can you expand on how the government is supporting neighbourhood houses to serve their communities?

Ros SPENCE: Thank you. We do know that neighbourhood houses are central to so many communities across Victoria, and they provide everything from community and social support to child care, education, training and volunteer opportunities. In addition to the \$2.5 million provided for food relief and the \$1 million grants program that our neighbourhood houses will be able to access – our support does not stop there – we have consistently affirmed our support of the neighbourhood house sector, committing more than \$43 million on an ongoing basis through the neighbourhood house coordination program. As minister, I have seen firsthand the ways in which neighbourhood houses support the social and economic participation of communities, particularly vulnerable populations.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you, Minister.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. Minister and department officials, our time has come to an end this evening on this particular portfolio. Thank you very much for taking the time to appear before the committee. The committee will follow up on any questions taken on notice in writing, and responses are required within five working days of the committee's request.

The committee is going to take a short break before beginning its consideration of the community sport portfolio at 7:05 pm.

I declare this hearing adjourned.

Witnesses withdrew.