

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Budget estimates 2020-21 (Spence)

Melbourne—Thursday, 3 December 2020

MEMBERS

Ms Lizzie Blandthorn—Chair

Mr Richard Riordan—Deputy Chair

Mr Sam Hibbins

Mr David Limbrick

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Mr Danny O'Brien

Ms Pauline Richards

Mr Tim Richardson

Ms Nina Taylor

Ms Bridget Vallence

WITNESSES

Ms Ros Spence, MP, Minister for Multicultural Affairs,

Mr John Batho, Acting Deputy Secretary, Fairer Victoria, and

Ms Sarah Caines, Acting Executive Director, Multicultural Affairs, Youth and CALD Communities Taskforce, Fairer Victoria, Department of Premier and Cabinet.

The CHAIR: We welcome you back, Minister, for the consideration of the multicultural affairs portfolio. We again invite you to make a 5-minute presentation, and this will be followed by questions from committee members. Thank you.

Visual presentation.

Ms SPENCE: Thank you, Chair. As we restart, I would again like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we are meeting and pay respect to elders past, present and emerging. And thank you all again, to the committee, for the opportunity to present on the multicultural affairs portfolio. I will now take the committee through a brief overview of the portfolio, including the 2019–20 highlights and the 2020–21 budget investments.

Our diversity is something the Victorian government celebrates as one of our state's key strengths, with the multicultural affairs portfolio supporting a Victoria that is fair, inclusive and safe for our culturally diverse communities. We do this by building inclusive communities and promoting social cohesion; addressing racism and discrimination; promoting positive settlement for migrants, refugees and asylum seekers; improving access to government services; ensuring government programs, services and policies are inclusive for all Victorians; and providing grants to celebrate culture and faith and to support multicultural community organisations. Since 2014–15 investment in the portfolio has increased from \$21.8 million to \$90.6 million in 2020–21. This increase reflects the critical importance of supporting our diverse communities and even more so as we respond to the coronavirus pandemic.

Funding from the multicultural affairs portfolio in 2019–20 has contributed to supporting thousands of organisations, many dozens of community facilities and hundreds of events across the state. We have continued to support Victoria's diverse communities, including working in partnership with African communities under the *Victorian African Communities Action Plan*, where we funded 13 homework clubs and hired eight school community liaison officers to support young people to better engage with school. Further, the strategic partnerships program supports 11 strategic engagement coordinators across 11 Victorian geographic areas to ensure our diverse communities have the support that they need. Also the Victorian government is committed to acting against racial and religious discrimination in any form. In 2019–2020 the government invested \$1.96 million to fund a range of anti-racism initiatives.

Across two packages the government has committed \$25.6 million to support Victoria's multicultural communities to get to the other side of the pandemic. This commitment has supported activities including partnerships with 162 organisations to support communities during the pandemic through the provision of emergency relief to more than 60 000 individuals and 8000 households and funding to almost 900 multicultural seniors organisations. In August 2020 the government established the CALD Communities Taskforce to coordinate action across government and deliver critical supports to multicultural communities. These packages complement the government's broader response to the coronavirus.

This year we have been reminded that the greatest strength of our state is our people. The budget invests more than \$69 million in our multicultural communities over two years. This includes \$34 million to support social and economic outcomes for multicultural communities, including investing \$21 million towards the development of new or upgraded multicultural facilities and more than \$8 million for a new community employment connector program to support economic participation by Victoria's multicultural communities. The budget also provides \$3 million to support multicultural media organisations, which is so important to their communities and to our state. Finally, it also includes funding for the Migrant Workers Centre, supports for improved settlement outcomes and the establishment of an anti-racism task force.

The government will continue to invest in our communities so they can continue to grow, prosper and contribute to our state and so we can improve outcomes for at-risk groups and strengthen social cohesion.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister, and I will pass the time to Ms Nina Taylor, MLC.

Ms TAYLOR: Thank you, Minister and department representatives. I thought it would be helpful for the committee to explore multicultural infrastructure, so I would like to refer you to budget paper 3, page 121. Can you please outline how this investment will support members of Victoria's culturally and linguistically diverse communities?

Ms SPENCE: Thank you, Ms Taylor. Thank you for that question, and yes, I often hear about the importance of facilities and spaces as being the heart of community in bringing people together, and perhaps nowhere more so than in our multicultural communities. I am sure that all of us have been to many of these facilities with members of our own local communities.

A sense of community is certainly important to everyone, including our culturally and linguistically diverse communities. Having a common facility where communities can come together is essential, and this is particularly important for our multicultural communities. This investment to deliver more than 60 multicultural infrastructure projects will contribute directly to this. The funding will support the building, upgrading and renovating of these community facilities. By creating and upgrading these community facilities the investment will support social cohesion and participation in our multicultural communities. It will allow them to come together to celebrate and preserve their traditions, and importantly, it will also better allow them to share those traditions with others.

We know the financial impact that responding to the coronavirus has had on many individuals and groups, and we know that many community organisations have been able to raise less money over the past year, so the government's support will enable many communities to deliver projects that they would not otherwise have been able to do. We know from our previous investments what a difference this funding is going to make for many multicultural communities, and this package will go a really long way to enabling Victorians to come together now and into the future.

I do have a short case study to show the benefits of one of our previously announced fundings. We did previously provide \$500 000 to the Victorian Tamil Association to construct a community centre in Dandenong's central business district to support the 40 000-strong Tamil community in Victoria. This grant helped that community to have its first-ever own community centre in Victoria. This has enabled the group to practice their traditional cultural events in a more familiar environment, and the community has reported that that centre has made them feel a real sense of pride, and it also supports them in feeling more connected to the wider community. The facility itself provides free language classes for VCE Tamil students, activities for Tamil senior citizens, a meeting venue for many Victorian Tamil and non-Tamil organisations, and thereby there are cost savings for community and grassroots organisations in the way of room hire, engagement activities and support for disengaged youth, isolated families, new migrants and asylum seekers. The flow-on benefits from these facilities just continue, so not only does it become a very valued place for the particular group, but the flow-on benefits are quite massive.

Ms TAYLOR: Thank you. For the benefit of members here and for the members of our diverse community who may be tuning in, can you please describe how funding will be allocated and how multicultural organisations may be able to access the funding available for their respective communities?

Ms SPENCE: Thank you for that question. The multicultural community infrastructure economic stimulus package is different from our regular and longstanding commitment to supporting multicultural community infrastructure. Up to \$15 million is being allocated to more than 60 projects, which have been drawn from previous applications that have been made this year through the Multicultural Community Infrastructure Fund grant programs—the very oversubscribed multicultural community infrastructure grant programs. With these programs that are consistently oversubscribed, this year demonstrating the considerable demand for funding for shovel-ready projects, this funding is an opportunity to fund additional projects that we would not have been otherwise able to do. So we will be working directly with those organisations to progress their projects and funding agreements. In addition to that \$15 million there is up to \$6 million that will be made available through a new round of the Multicultural Community Infrastructure Fund, and we expect to open that fund for new

applications and new projects this month. With both programs we expect that projects will be completed prior to 31 December 2021. So there is that combination of the previous projects that have been submitted through prior applications that will be part of the \$15 million, and then there is the soon-to-be-open grants round of the \$6 million.

Just in regard to the \$15 million, I will just make note of one project that I know will be of interest to you because I know that you were disappointed you could not come out earlier this week—and that was one of the projects that we announced through that allocation, and that was the \$3.5 million towards the development of the Jewish Arts Quarter in Elsternwick. This funding is in addition to the \$1.5 million that had previously been provided to that project, which brings the state government contribution to that project to \$5 million. This funding will support the design and construction of a new building in Selwyn Street, and it includes the Jewish Museum of Australia, performance and studio spaces and co-working spaces—and it brings together project partners from a range of key institutions, including the Jewish Museum of Australia, the Kadimah centre, the Jewish Holocaust Centre and others. The investment in the Jewish Arts Quarter will be a real catalyst for arts, culture and business in the area, and it will become a focal point for Jewish culture and the Jewish community in Victoria and Australia. Construction is expected to commence shortly. But this will absolutely change that streetscape, and it will become a real destination and it will make a real precinct out of that space, so it is quite an exciting project that I know that you have a keen interest in.

Ms TAYLOR: Indeed. It is going to be amazing. It will indeed.

So from my own local experience, I find some communities have greater access to capital and fundraising—more so than others. By saying so I make distinctions between well-established and settled cohorts and the new and emerging community groups. The same could be said about small and large ethnic and faith communities. What measures or concessions will the government make, if any, to encourage and ensure new and emerging and smaller communities can also reap the benefits that this program has to offer?

Ms SPENCE: Thank you, and that is a particularly important issue, and the area that I represent as a local member has many of those new and emerging communities, so it is something quite significant. Firstly, we do recognise that these groups may have less capacity to contribute financially, so in response we have introduced a lower match funding threshold for applications from organisations that represent new and emerging communities or applications from regional Victoria, so that is one way that this is addressed. Secondly, we also prioritise these groups when the projects are being assessed and determined in regard to the funding application. So applications from regional Victoria or from new and emerging communities, they receive additional points as part of the assessment process. So there are those two ways that new and emerging communities and also applications coming from regional Victoria are treated a bit differently.

Ms TAYLOR: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister, and I will pass the call to the Deputy Chair, Mr Richard Riordan.

Mr RIORDAN: Thanks very much, Chair. Thanks, Minister. My first question is referring to budget paper 3. Minister, if the economic recovery support for Victoria's multicultural communities and young people is so important, why is the funding just for the two years?

Ms SPENCE: Thank you, Deputy Chair. That funding is for two years. However, that is not the entirety of funding; there is also base funding and a number of other programs within the portfolio. That is not the extent of programs within the portfolio, and I am quite happy to pass to Mr Batho, who can take you through a number of those programs.

Mr RIORDAN: So just perhaps in answering that, Mr Batho, I am wanting to know what happens with the subsequent years considering that these communities are sometimes our most vulnerable. They get resource workers and set up programs, and anyone in that sector knows that setting up something for two years is very, very problematic, so what sort of security have they got in maintaining services and programs with that time line?

Mr BATHO: I will just make the point with these output initiatives that these are new output initiatives that are announced in this budget. There is ongoing base funding in the portfolio which funds ongoing services for communities.

Mr RIORDAN: Right. So what would you be expecting to happen with this money?

Mr BATHO: I can take you through the investment of the \$34 million for economic recovery if that would be useful.

Mr RIORDAN: I think it is listed there, but the question on the \$34.8 million—there are six items totalling \$34.8 million and they are only funded for one year, is that right?

Mr BATHO: So on the budget paper there is \$30.1 million allocated to 2020–21, and I can talk you through what some of those initiatives are, which will give you a sense of why they have been funded.

Mr RIORDAN: Are they listed in the budget paper?

Mr BATHO: They are described in the budget paper.

Mr RIORDAN: Yes, okay. That is fine. All right, we will keep moving just to get through the questions. I want to just move the African communities action plan—budget paper 3. There is a funding initiative there for \$4.5 million for the *Victorian African Communities Action Plan* initiatives. Is this a continuation of the previous African communities action plan?

Ms SPENCE: Yes, it is. So yes, the *Victorian African Communities Action Plan* does continue, the implementation committee does continue, and this is in addition to the previous funding that has been provided.

Mr RIORDAN: Right, so once again I guess I am asking the question. We are in agreement that these are pretty vulnerable communities at times, and it was really highlighted this year at the towers. Once again it is only one-year funding. Is that sending the right message that the government actually is really supporting them? I mean, why are they only one-year funding rounds for that community?

Ms SPENCE: Well, I think, to be fair, that committee is doing great work, but we are also working with that committee where they are also very much setting their forward agenda.

Mr RIORDAN: You are setting their agenda?

Ms SPENCE: No, I said they are setting their agenda—they are setting their forward agenda. So they have not determined as yet what their priorities are for that \$4.5 million. They are needing to work through their plans. They are very much working out what they want to do. It is their committee.

Mr RIORDAN: Right. Okay. Certainly from my own experience during the lockdown at the Flemington towers—I happened to visit there at the request of some of my constituents—the question I would have is: there seemed to be a lot of disengagement of the groups there. I am just wondering what lessons we have learned this year. I mean, we are giving them a one-year-only budget; we are saying they are working out their plans. Are we giving them, the African communities particularly, enough support?

Ms SPENCE: Look, I think we are. The African communities are incredibly important to the Victorian community, and the implementation committee is doing a terrific job. They have been working through their priority areas. Some of the initiatives that they have been undertaking are in education: \$3 million has been committed to increasing school participation, completion rates and family engagement. To date funds have supported eight school community liaison officers to work with students and their families and 12 homework clubs that commenced operation in term 3 of this year. In their priority area of leadership, training through the Australian Institute of Company Directors was provided for 25 African community leaders seeking to advance board careers.

Mr RIORDAN: Minister, I get the gist. You have got quite a range of things. That is good. I guess the message I am trying to—

Ms SPENCE: These are their priority areas, Deputy Chair. That is why I was keen to let you know what they saw as their priorities.

Mr RIORDAN: Some of the feedback I am getting from the African communities is Africa is a whole continent, and we often have whole multicultural groups allocated just to one country. We have got this one

concept to a whole continent full of many, many different groups and opinions and views. What are you doing in this plan that is guaranteeing that broad understanding of what it means to be an African-Australian? The feedback I get is that we are picking winners a little bit with community groups, and there are lots of people being left out, and that was certainly the message at the Flemington towers—that some African groups get heard and others do not.

Ms SPENCE: As I was saying, these priority areas are the priority areas as determined by the members of the implementation committee of the plan.

Mr RIORDAN: And have you got confidence that that implementation committee is broad enough?

Ms SPENCE: It is very broad. I might just ask Mr Batho to talk to the composition of the committee, because he would be more familiar with the actual breakdown.

Mr BATHO: Thanks, Minister. The composition of the committee has broad representation across different African communities within Victoria, and it has been operating for a number of years. Each of the members of the implementation committee represent various people of African heritage within Victoria.

Mr RIORDAN: Yes. So what are you doing to actively make sure you have got those broad opinions?

Mr BATHO: Well, we have—

The CHAIR: Sorry to interrupt you, but we are out of time there. I will pass the call to Mr Sam Hibbins, MP.

Mr HIBBINS: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Minister and your team, for appearing this evening. I will just refer to the overall budget allocation for multicultural affairs policy programs over this financial year and the last. What role did the office for multicultural affairs play within the response to the COVID-19 pandemic?

Ms SPENCE: In regard to the response to the pandemic—and thank you for that question—there has been a range of responses. Primarily the response has been by way of two support packages. There was a support package that was provided in May that was of \$11.3 million; \$6.1 million of that was allocated to 2020–21. And then there was a further support package provided in August of \$14.3 million. I can go through the breakdown of those support packages in regard to where they went. In regard to the second support package—

Mr HIBBINS: I guess more to my point was, and I put this to the Premier earlier in these hearings as well, one of the criticisms that we have heard from multicultural communities and the Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria was around the lack of coordination of the state government in including multicultural organisations and ethnic associations who have actually got a lot of experience of working with those communities, and that particularly impacted around communication, not just what was being communicated in language, but how it was communicated—

The CHAIR: Sorry, Mr Hibbins, I would just remind you that this is the inquiry into the budget estimates and not the government's response to the COVID pandemic, so if you could keep your questions to the scrutiny of the budget papers, please.

Mr HIBBINS: Sure. So within both the outputs for this financial year and last financial year, do you see any lessons being learned from the issues that were raised by groups?

Ms SPENCE: Yes. Thank you, Mr Hibbins. I would note that the second package that I was about to refer to that was provided in August, the \$14.3 million, along with that package there was also the establishment of the CALD Communities Taskforce. Part of that task force involved allocations of funding to community organisations, and that involved direct liaising, working with community organisations across the state from August to this day, including many in the sector as well as support organisations. We have also been having much engagement with organisations and with the sector throughout the entire time, including with sector briefings and engagement by way of roundtables. Indeed there have been presentations made to the task force by the ECCV and others. Does that mean everything that could be done has been done? There is always more to be learned. This year was one out of the box. It did not come with an instruction manual. There is always more that can be done and of course we are going to learn from it. We have had multicultural sector briefings whereby—

Mr HIBBINS: Sorry, I will just do it in time. Do you think, in terms of the announcements with the change to machinery of government and my understanding, that the office of multicultural affairs is now going to sit within the new—I think it is called the fairness department or the fairness and human services department?

Ms SPENCE: Yes.

Mr HIBBINS: And will you now play a stronger role in terms of liaising or working with the human services side of that department?

Ms SPENCE: In what regard? I do not quite know what the question is.

Mr HIBBINS: Well, I just note that it was DHHS that was—

The CHAIR: Mr Hibbins, I would again remind you keep your questions in relation to the budget papers.

Mr HIBBINS: For next year's outputs, or outputs for 2021, how will the office of multicultural affairs actually work with the human services side of the new department?

Ms SPENCE: I do not think I can answer about next year.

The CHAIR: Sorry to interrupt, Minister, Mr Hibbins, but the time for consideration of this portfolio has concluded. We thank you very much for appearing before the committee 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.

I also thank all ministers and officers who have given evidence to the committee today, and of course Hansard and the secretariat.

The committee will resume consideration of the 2020–21 budget estimates tomorrow.

I declare this hearing adjourned.

Committee adjourned.