

# **PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE**

## **Budget estimates 2020–21 (Hutchins)**

Melbourne—Tuesday, 15 December 2020

### **MEMBERS**

Ms Lizzie Blandthorn—Chair

Mr Richard Riordan—Deputy Chair

Mr Sam Hibbins

Mr David Limbrick

Mr Gary Maas

Mr Danny O’Brien

Ms Pauline Richards

Mr Tim Richardson

Ms Nina Taylor

Ms Bridget Vallence



**WITNESSES**

Ms Natalie Hutchins, MP, Minister for Crime Prevention,

Ms Rebecca Falkingham, Secretary, and

Ms Corri McKenzie, Deputy Secretary, Police, Fines and Crime Prevention, Department of Justice and Community Safety.

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

I would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional Aboriginal owners of the land on which we are meeting. We pay our respects to them, their culture, their elders past, present and future and elders from other communities who may be here today.

On behalf of the Parliament, the committee is conducting this Inquiry into the 2020–21 Budget Estimates. Its aim is to scrutinise public administration and finance to improve outcomes for the Victorian community.

We note that witnesses and members should remove their masks when speaking to the committee but should 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.

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 as soon as possible.

We welcome Minister Hutchins and your officials for, in the first instance, the consideration of the corrections portfolio, and we invite you to make a 5-minute opening statement, which will be followed by questions from the committee. Thank you.

**Ms HUTCHINS:** Thank you, Chair.

**Visual presentation.**

**Ms HUTCHINS:** We will kick off with a bit of a slideshow presentation. The 2020–21 state budget invests \$18 million over four years in crime prevention, building on an almost \$50 million investment since the 2016–17 budget. This includes \$11 million for the new building safer communities program and \$7 million for youth support services. There is one performance measure for crime prevention: that 100 per cent of community crime prevention grants have been properly acquitted.

Our next slide shows that our crime prevention investments are focused on three strategic priorities: empowering and investing in communities to deliver effective place-based crime prevention initiatives; enhancing and connecting support for people and communities to address risk factors for offending; and building evidence and increasing the impact of crime prevention activities.

Our next slide goes to the new \$11 million Building Safer Communities program, which will continue to support communities to recover from the pandemic and address risk factors for offending. This program was announced at the recent Building Safer Communities forum that we held in Brimbank just two weeks ago. The program includes a series of forums, competitive grants of up to \$300 000 and targeted grants of up to \$700 000 to support community-led efforts in addressing the root causes of crime. I look forward to seeing what projects councils and the communities and our local leaders bring forward.

In October I announced \$5.6 million for 31 community safety infrastructure programs. Successful projects will engage jobseekers throughout the Working for Victoria platform to support economic and social recovery from COVID-19. For example, in Melton \$200 000 was awarded to improve the safety of the Little Blind Creek Reserve, an initiative that was developed through lots of public consultation, and it is a great example of the investment in local community in developing solutions. They had identified that to make the park safer where

crime had been committed they needed to encourage more people to use it, so the funding will be used in that particular circumstance to put in new equipment, seating and exercise stations and to run programs to engage youth in that park environment.

Our Building Safer Communities forums are bringing together young people and key organisations such as police, schools, local councils, crime prevention partners and youth services around the issues of crime and safety. Successful forums have been held in Brimbank and Craigieburn so far, and we look forward to rolling some more of these forums out in 2021.

Our partnership and engagement work also includes \$2.35 million for the new Sports Alliance for crime prevention and to provide support to the African-Australian communities; and \$400 000 to support Pasifika young people in Melbourne's west. We will continue to work with communities to improve community safety and prevent crime in the context of COVID-19. That is our presentation. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much. And just for the record I said 'corrections' when I introduced you, and we are obviously considering crime prevention. I will pass the call to Mr Gary Maas, MP.

**Mr MAAS:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Minister, and thank you again, departmental officials, for your attendance today. Minister, if I could take you to the topic of the community safety infrastructure grant, and in particular I reference budget paper 3, page 294. I note that you recently announced some grants funding which targeted community safety projects. I was hoping you could outline for the committee what the outcomes from that were.

**Ms HUTCHINS:** Yes. Thanks for your interest. The question around community safety infrastructure grants is a good one because these are grants that have been put forward by communities in conjunction with their local leaders, with councils; 17 of the projects out of 31 were actually successful council applications and 14 were community organisations that were successful. There was a really good balance in selecting these programs between rural, regional and metro programs.

The fund was extremely popular. We did have 253 applications and only 31 got selected. Those requests, when you add up the requests for funding across those applications, could have totalled close to \$50 million. We had to run this program on the \$5.6 million that had been allocated, so we chose programs through a set of criteria that delivered improvements to lighting to specific areas where we knew there were issues in that community and facilities that could increase the use and safety of parks in particular. It included new security, new gates on public spaces, bollards, speed humps and alarm systems. Each project was absolutely unique to that local area and local need.

**Mr MAAS:** Thank you. CCTV is quite often a popular choice. I was just wondering if many of the projects included the installation of CCTV infrastructure.

**Ms HUTCHINS:** Yes. Thanks for the question. CCTV was a very significant ask in the applications that came forward. With the projects that were funded, across the board there were 115 new CCTV cameras supported. And they were right across the state, from places like Dandenong, Pakenham, Sunshine, Warrnambool, Corio, Lara, Kerang and Traralgon. Those cameras are extremely important to local communities, both for people who have been victims of crime in the past, to offer them some security in that area, but also as a prevention tool to deter crime from happening in those locations. So in announcing these funds I was lucky enough to talk directly to my own local council, Brimbank council, around their success in getting some funding for the Sunshine activity centre, which was really driven by local businesses—that application—in partnership with Brimbank council. And they were successful in getting a \$500 000 grant out of this program. And Warrnambool City Council also was successful in getting three CCTV cameras and lighting improved in a local car park that had been renowned for incidence of crime.

**Mr MAAS:** Thank you. You mentioned that the program was not just confined to councils. I was hoping you would be able to provide the committee with an example of a project that was funded from a community group and how you expect to improve community safety by that measure.

**Ms HUTCHINS:** Yes. I was certainly able to talk with a number of non-local government organisations as well who were successful. The one that comes to mind is the Islamic Society of Victoria, who received \$243 000 worth of funding through this program to upgrade security at Preston mosque. That was extremely

well received. Unfortunately I was unable to visit due to lockdown, but certainly through the online announcement that we were able to make the level of emotion in regard to this announcement was extremely high. Many of the representatives at the mosque had been battling some fears from their own community about similar attacks that happened in New Zealand this time last year and having the installation of some security to ensure that they felt safe in their place of worship. So part of the funding has gone to delivery and upgrade of security physically but also in terms of training sessions for some of the staff there and enhanced personal training for some of the worshippers that go there as well.

**Mr MAAS:** Excellent. Thank you. And in terms of the grant rounds, will there be further rounds of the program?

**Ms HUTCHINS:** Yes, there will. The program in this form was just a one-off response to COVID, but in the future we have new grants that are coming that will have the same type of capture around promoting community safety and preventing crime before it occurs. The first round of the new grants will be named the building safer communities program. That will open up in January and include two competitive grant streams. The first one will be Creating Safer Places and the second one will be the Crime Prevention Innovation Fund. The first fund that I mentioned there, Creating Safer Places, will offer up grants of between \$25 000 and \$300 000 to councils to fund urban design and place-based safety initiatives. The second, which is the innovation fund, will have grants in the similar range of \$25 000 to \$300 000 for councils, not-for-profits and other specialist organisations to be able to partner around innovative community safety programs and targeting root causes of crime. And, thirdly, our third stream is called Empowering Communities grants, and that will offer local communities in a specific geographical area the ability to fund programs that have worked in the past for them that are no longer funded, and that could be an initiative that was from another level of government. If they feel that that was something that worked for them that needs to be prioritised, it will be prioritised through this program. Or it might be to look at new projects in that local area to tackle root causes of crime with a bit of evidence-based community consultation and of course local partnership. They will be some of the measures by which those grants will be decided and targeted.

**Mr MAAS:** Great. Thanks, Minister. I make reference to budget paper 3, at page 104, and note that you mentioned the Building Safer Communities program, for which \$11 million was recently announced. Would you be able to outline for the committee the details of that program and the approach that the government is taking to preventing crime in our communities?

**Ms HUTCHINS:** Yes. Thanks for the question. I think ahead of this summer we are very focused—in coming out of COVID lockdown—on how we get to the root causes of crime and deter, in particular, young people that might be most at risk coming into this summer and on looking at ways that we can partner with local communities, both this summer and ongoing down the track, to do a wraparound program that will look at how we can connect those that are most at risk of entering the justice system or who have had contact with the justice system, to ensure that they are engaged in a project that has some strong evidence of how we can turn that around. I think through the experience of COVID, particularly lockdown, we have a lot of young people in our communities who have become disengaged—disengaged from school, disengaged from perhaps sports, possibly even after lockdown disengaged from their own families, whether that be due to family violence or substance or alcohol abuse. Those are things that are real and are happening, and we have the services out there to know where that is peaking and we can see where we need to target some of these resources. I think through this sort of program we can really get a place-based solution to try to tackle crime before it happens.

**Mr MAAS:** Just very quickly, would you be able to go into the Brimbank forum for us?

**Ms HUTCHINS:** Yes. The Brimbank forum, which occurred a couple of weeks ago, was really about partnering with Youth Junction, a local youth services provider; councils; and we had various hierarchy from our police in the north-western region, including Luke Cornelius, who was there, who is really passionate about tackling youth crime. We have done this in partnership with New York University, who is overseeing and giving us kind of state-of-the-art advice around how to engage communities better and build this kind of resilience for our young people in a place-based area. And in Brimbank—

**The CHAIR:** Sorry to interrupt you there, Minister, but the member's time has expired. Sorry to cut you off. I will pass to the Deputy Chair, Mr Richard Riordan.

**Mr RIORDAN:** Thanks very much, Chair. Welcome, Minister. A couple of things first up. I refer to budget paper 3, pages 104 and 105, which will be the focus of my questions today. Minister, the funding announced for crime prevention initiatives seems pretty light in detail. There is a nice little bit of paragraph wording at the end. Can you give us some specific details of what crime initiatives you are proposing in this budget specifically?

**Ms HUTCHINS:** Thank you. I assume you mean crime prevention initiatives?

**Mr RIORDAN:** Yes, crime prevention.

**Ms HUTCHINS:** Certainly some of those that I have talked about in the previous answer that I have given, but really having some place-based solutions I think is the most important thing. Having targeted funding for our youth services that operate around the place is an extremely important part of that. We have dedicated out of this budget \$7 million to boost our youth services, those agents that do that work for crime prevention in our local areas—for example, organisations like YSAS, who operate across the north-western suburbs of Melbourne, where we have seen a spike in crime as well. We are certainly rolling out the new grants program that I have talked about, that \$11 million, going forward. Really we will have some criteria that makes sure that we have some evidence base coming out of that to show that we have been able to deter those most at risk from the system.

**Mr RIORDAN:** So the focus is on evidence-based data gathering, is it?

**Ms HUTCHINS:** No, not necessarily on data gathering but on delivery of services. But what we want to ensure is, at the completion of these grants and the implementation of them, that we see the evidence of where we have been able to drive down crime or prevent crime from happening in a place-based situation.

**Mr RIORDAN:** All right. On that theme then that you have talked about, about monitoring and watching the benefits of crime reduction, in the questionnaire you sent us—and I think it is detailed here in the budget as well—it talks about bringing forward speed camera installation as a deployment of mobile road safety cameras, bringing the funding forward and completing everything this year rather than in future years. Is that correct?

**Ms MCKENZIE:** It is in the minister for police's portfolio, Mr Riordan.

**Mr RIORDAN:** It is the minister for police but under crime prevention. Is that what it is—

**Ms MCKENZIE:** It is in the output. It does not fall within the portfolio.

**Mr RIORDAN:** It does not fall within the portfolio.

**Ms MCKENZIE:** You are absolutely right; it falls within the output, but the initiative is within the minister for police's portfolio.

**Mr RIORDAN:** Right. So that is nothing to do with you. Okay.

Minister, in the department's questionnaire, on page 20 it is stated that:

Crime prevention initiatives have been reoriented to help mitigate the anticipated social impacts of COVID-19 as restrictions are relaxed.

What exactly has been done to progress delivery back into the face-to-face format?

**Ms HUTCHINS:** In terms of services of crime prevention?

**Mr RIORDAN:** Yes, and in terms of preventing crime—like face-to-face interaction.

**Ms HUTCHINS:** There are a number of programs that run and have continued to run through lockdown. They are all very unique in terms of their delivery in targeting in particular young people, but during COVID there were a number of programs that continued to run both online—but I think your question was: coming out, how have they continued face-to-face?

**Mr RIORDAN:** Yes. Are we getting back to face-to-face programs?

**Ms HUTCHINS:** Yes, we certainly are. One of our programs that we have funded in the north-west is one that has targeted preventing youth crime and furthering youth engagement through the Youth Umbrella Project, which runs in conjunction with references from the Sunshine Magistrates Court, but we have also got another program around the Pasifika community, which ran in detail—has done all year, even during lockdown. But in terms of coming out of that, activities to engage young people most at risk have basically picked up face-to-face in a lot of cases in the outside environment, not in an indoors environment.

**Mr RIORDAN:** You have given examples today of mainly some metropolitan initiatives and programs. Can you point to anything specifically for rural and regional Victoria, which across some jurisdictions—even this year, when we were all supposed to be at home—saw increases in crime? Can you point to anywhere outside of Melbourne that we are putting some focus on this?

**Ms HUTCHINS:** Yes. Certainly there are a number of new projects that are going to commence going forward over this summer that are building upon work that has already been done. There is a particular one in—I am just trying to find it—Ballarat that will continue.

**Mr RIORDAN:** So, for example, increasing risk of theft and so on in rural and regional Victoria with increasing and ballooning stock prices, that is not on your radar?

**Ms HUTCHINS:** There is a program in Ballarat. I am pretty sure it is targeting 55 young people at risk of contact with the system—that is, the juvenile justice system.

**Mr RIORDAN:** So 55 young people in Ballarat is the extent of our rural and regional support for crime prevention.

**Ms HUTCHINS:** No, it is not the extent. You asked me for an example, and that is one. It is not the extent; it is certainly part of work that we are doing. But there are programs that are running out across the state, in particular in Warrnambool and in Gippsland. Some of those have not occurred face-to-face yet but are planned to in the summer. There is basketball engagement in Shepparton as well. These are all programs that are boosting basic services for those that are most at risk of committing crimes.

**Mr RIORDAN:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. I will pass the call to Mr Sam Hibbins, MP.

**Mr HIBBINS:** Thanks, Chair. And thank you, Minister and your team, for appearing this afternoon. Just on the single performance measure that crime prevention has, which is ‘Community crime prevention grant payments properly acquitted’, 100 per cent—I am just wondering: is it really appropriate to have a single performance measure which is basically about getting money out the door? I mean ultimately I presume your performance measure would be reducing crime and something that is a bit more qualitative. Do you have other performance measures that you are measuring the performance of crime prevention against?

**Ms HUTCHINS:** Look, I am constantly, every Monday, looking at the levels of crime and where it is happening across our state—where we have decreases, where we have spates of increases. I would say the reflections in the BP3 measures are not reflective of the entire work that we are doing across government. Our crime prevention strategy work that we have been doing is really about very localised projects to ensure that we are actually, I guess, getting out there and making a difference in those communities that need it. Since 2015 we have had almost 800 community-led, evidence-based crime prevention programs with a value of over \$40 million. We are getting on with investing more, and that is that new \$11 million in the building safer communities grants. We have also been working to form a new sports alliance in crime prevention, which is actually working with kids that have had contact with the justice system or are currently in the justice system to give them mentors and spaces that are of interest to them.

**Mr HIBBINS:** Just in terms of the crime prevention strategy, has that been completed?

**Ms HUTCHINS:** It has not been launched due to the COVID shutdown, and we are actually building some more work into that based on the forums that we have currently got underway.

**Mr HIBBINS:** Just following up on a question I asked your predecessor in the last hearings, there was a task force, I understand, put together to oversee that strategy. Is the task force still operating?

**Ms HUTCHINS:** No, the task force actually wound up its work, I think, in the weeks before I took over as minister. That work has subsequently been delivered to me. I did not see fit to actually be launching that work during COVID lockdown. And then of course we have now launched some further localised strategies that we want to build into our crime prevention strategies, so that is why we undertook the two forums that we have done, and there are forums that we hope to undertake next year.

**Mr HIBBINS:** Thank you. In terms of crime prevention initiatives, it indicates—it uses the term ‘priority cohorts’. Can you give an indication of what the government’s priority cohorts are? This is in budget paper 3, page 105.

**Ms HUTCHINS:** Look, I think, to be honest, since I became minister and certainly before my time, with the previous minister, there has been a real focus on preventing youth crime, because if we are going to change the long-term trajectory around crime figures, that is where we need to be putting our efforts right now. So preventing youth crime has been a real focus. Unfortunately there are cohorts of young people who are well over-represented in our youth justice system, and that is where we are putting part of our focus. But I do not think there is a one-size-fits-all solution to any cohort or CALD group or the Aboriginal community—there is no one-size-fits-all solution across the entire state. What the needs are in Mildura are quite different to what the needs are in Glenroy. So what we are doing is making sure that we have got a system that is responsive to the local needs.

**Mr HIBBINS:** Okay. Just finally, in terms of the evidence gathering, how are you actually demonstrating the effectiveness of the individual funding that you are doing? Is it one-off grants or have you actually got sustained funding in terms of places over a series of times?

**Ms HUTCHINS:** Yes. Currently, with the plans going forward with the money out of this budget we will be looking at both the success and the opportunity to roll it on. I have heard loud and clear from many of our partners in the community that there is a real need to continuously fund some of the programs that are in place. For example, our youth services have not always been funded to deliver that contact work after hours or on weekends, and probably quite an important part of deterring young people from the youth justice system is having those supports available at the times of the day and on the days of the week that crime is likely to occur rather than waiting for that service the next day or the next morning at 9 o’clock. They have been pretty important investments—

**The CHAIR:** Sorry to cut you off there, Minister, but the time for consideration of this portfolio has finished. We will take a short break of 5 minutes before resuming with you to consider the corrections portfolio. Thank you.

**Witnesses withdrew.**