

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Budget estimates 2020-21 (Leane)

Melbourne—Friday, 18 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 Vallenge

WITNESSES

Mr Shaun Leane, MLC, Minister for Local Government,

Mr Simon Phemister, Secretary,

Ms Emily Phillips, Deputy Secretary, Local Government and Suburban Development, and

Mr Colin Morrison, Acting Executive Director, Local Government Victoria, Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions.

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 may remove their masks when speaking to the committee but should replace them afterwards.

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 Leane, in the first instance for the local government portfolio. We invite you to make a 5-minute presentation, and this will be followed by questions from the committee.

Mr LEANE: Thank you, Chair, and thanks to the committee for asking me to present today. The Victorian government supports councils through a number of initiatives that underpin vital local infrastructure and services. I am pleased to have the opportunity to share some of those initiatives with the committee this afternoon.

Visual presentation.

Mr LEANE: Firstly, a little context about the sector. As you know, there are 79 councils in Victoria, ranging from Casey, which has more than 350 000 people, to Queenscliff, which has less than 3000. As you would know as well, councils are major employers. They are employing over 50 000 Victorians, and the good thing about this sector is the majority of it is a female workforce. They spend more than \$9 billion on services and infrastructure; they will do that this year, and \$3.4 billion of that will be on capital works.

I am pleased to place on the record that the sector has done a tremendous job during the recent global pandemic challenge. They kept essential services running. They moved mountains to help their community groups. Libraries in particular did a fantastic job in keeping people connected, particularly children and elderly people.

This year's budget has funded a number of significant initiatives for local government, including several that directly support councils and their communities in recovering from the pandemic. We continue to support local infrastructure with an ongoing commitment to the Growing Suburbs Fund. That is \$75 million, with \$25 million already allocated in June, to fund infrastructure such as community centres, playgrounds, parks, pavilions—all vital assets for growing communities.

The Growing Suburbs Fund has a fantastic record. It has enabled \$750 million of investment and has created 7500 jobs across 221 projects since 2015. This year we have expanded its reach to the peri-urban councils, which obviously include Bass Coast, Baw Baw, Golden Plains, Surf Coast, Macedon Ranges and Moorabool.

We have also committed record levels of funding to support the Victorian public library services, including an additional \$11.1 million for Living Libraries program to fund new libraries and the expansion and renovation of library facilities across the state.

The community infrastructure loans scheme is another way we support councils to get local projects off the ground. It gives councils access to low-interest subsidised loans from the state.

Earlier this year we provided loans for 14 councils for 20 community projects through this scheme. In the recent budget we have also included funding to make another \$100 million in subsidised loans available. We have also announced a brand new \$6.3 million program focused on getting women into jobs as local government building surveyors. We have created 40 opportunities for women to train to become building surveyors within councils. This is a chance for women impacted by the corona pandemic to launch a new career in the construction industry, and it also fills a significant skills gap that is being experienced in our state.

The next initiative recognises the fantastic work that councils do in working with communities in planning for and recovering from emergencies, and we saw that earlier this year following the devastating bushfires of East Gippsland and the north-east of the state. We have put an additional \$1 million into the municipal emergency resourcing program, bringing the funding this year to \$5.6 million. This helps councils with the cost of planning for emergencies, employing emergency managers and making sure they are ready for whatever nature throws at them. And finally, we also have the roadside weed and pest programs—a modest amount of money that actually goes a long way, helping 56 rural, regional and outer metropolitan councils with grants of up to \$75 000 to tackle invasive weeds that can impact on farmland and of course pose a fire risk.

I think we will move to the next slide. I have already mentioned some of the great work that councils have done. One of the initiatives from my colleague Jaala Pulford, Working for Victoria, has created over 4500 jobs. There was a great take-up of this by local councils, and there is also—(*Time expired*)

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

Mr RIORDAN: Thanks, Chair. Welcome, Minister—and sporting the new look, as we mentioned earlier.

Mr LEANE: Thank you.

Mr RIORDAN: Municipal Monitor Laurinda Gardner was appointed to advise the state government on governance at Casey council. Her scathing report focused on councillor failures, including their total misunderstanding of declaring conflicts of interest; a culture of bullying and intimidation; and a systematic failure of governance. How will you ensure we never see a repeat of Casey council corruption?

Mr LEANE: Well, I can say from the outset, Deputy Chair, that there will be donation reform in the local government sector. We have been waiting for the recommendations from that particular IBAC case. We will look at their recommendations, and I would say there is a good chance we will embrace them all. But we need to look at them first. I think, as you would know, probably this is a level of government that is lagging behind the work that we did at state level regarding donation reform. You will see as early as next year that we will work towards this to have a better environment insofar as the way councillors will operate and the way certain people may interact with them.

Mr RIORDAN: You made the comment about donations at the local government level. Do you foreshadow bringing local government donations in line with what state members of Parliament have for donations?

Mr LEANE: Deputy Chair, I do not particularly want to rule anything in or out. I have had a conversation. I was asked a question in the Legislative Council around whether we should adopt another jurisdiction's way of dealing with this and what they have implemented in their own Act—I think it was New South Wales. I am very keen to look at what other jurisdictions have done. I am very keen to look at what the outcome of IBAC is and what recommendations they might give to us. And I am also happy to consider the reforms that we have made at this level of government.

Mr RIORDAN: Would you agree essentially that—for example, we have seen in the Melbourne City Council local elections it is said that Sally Capp was given over \$316 000 in donations for election to Lord

Mayor. Once again, comparing it to the Premier of the state, who is only supposed to fundraise for \$1000, there is a fair discrepancy there, wouldn't you agree?

Mr LEANE: I think if you take the example that you are making, it is hard to not agree that there is a fair discrepancy on those amounts of money.

Mr RIORDAN: Okay. Whittlesea council: upon the recommendation of Municipal Monitor Yehudi Blacher this council was sacked in March 2020, having gone through five CEOs in five years and having spent \$500 000 on legal disputes. Will the process be reformed to make sure this lengthy and costly process is not repeated for other ratepayers in other councils?

Mr LEANE: Well, I suppose I do not particularly want to delve into the history of any particular council, but I have got to say, Deputy Chair, I think council culture is an area I am really keen to work on. I have written to the sector. I have written to all the new mayors after the election—and some of them returned—about that. I am pretty keen for us to all work together as a sector.

Deputy Chair, I consider that the sector, you know, is the elected representatives, but also, as I said in my presentation, there are 50 000 people that work in this sector and do a great job and there are also other groups that interact with the sector. But I am pretty keen with the sector to work on a culture that we all own the good things—and local councils do good work; they do some very good work. I would like us to get to a point that we all own the bad things and we work together, and there should be an aspiration from the sector—and I also consider myself as local government minister as part of the sector—that we have a goal that we do not go through any experiences similar to what you have just outlined. We should have a goal that no council should have to go into administration if we all work together. If a council has got a problem, then the sector should actually assist that particular council, and as I said I include myself in that.

Mr RIORDAN: Okay. I see in the budget the public sector information management, privacy and integrity funding has increased significantly, from \$12.8 million to \$16.8 million. Is that a reflection of your concerns around probity in local government?

Mr LEANE: Is that time?

The CHAIR: Time has expired. Sorry, Minister.

Mr LEANE: I wanted to answer that one—that was good.

The CHAIR: Perhaps the next government member may like to concede some of his time to allow you to do that.

Mr MAAS: You can answer the question if you like.

Mr RIORDAN: Thank you, Mr Maas.

Mr LEANE: I can? Yes, and thank you. Deputy Chair, I read the monitors reports. I admit to not reading them as closely as an MP when they were first reported, compared to being a minister. I read the monitors reports, and as far as the councils that were put into administration as an act of ours—of Parliament—I cannot accept in this day and age some of the commentary in the monitors reports where we had councillors and others making sexist and racist comments towards staff. I cannot get my head around in this day and age how that can be okay in any sector. I know it happens. I am not naive; I know it happens in other areas. But I am really keen for us, as I said: as a sector, if we own it, then we will be able to fix it.

Mr RIORDAN: Thank you.

Mr MAAS: Thanks, Minister. If I could take you to a topic which I know all of us in this room would be passionate about, and that is the resourcing of our public libraries. There is a \$56.9 million funding boost in the budget for that. Would you be able to explain for the committee what that funding is going towards?

Mr LEANE: Thank you, Mr Maas. I will go through the breakdown. As you said, it is \$56.9 million. That includes \$45.8 million directed to grants to public libraries through the public libraries funding program. There

is an additional \$2.2 million provided to that quantum in this budget, and that is a 2.5 per cent increase from last year's budget.

The public libraries funding program provides annual funding to councils, regional library corporations and Vision Australia for the provision of public library services. This funding contributes to the purchase of collection items, physical and electronic, as you would know; information technology; library and outreach programs; and other services provided by public libraries in Victoria.

There is an additional \$11.1 million over two years that has been committed to expand the Living Libraries Infrastructure Program to help councils build new libraries, purchase mobile libraries and expand or redevelop existing libraries. So \$10 million will be available from this particular program in 2021—I undercut us; no, I didn't—there will be \$10.1 million in the following year, so councils will be able to apply for up to \$1 million, and there is also the \$1.1 million that is in the Premier's Reading Challenge to buy books on the Premier's Reading Challenge list.

I think I said at the outset, Mr Maas, that we all know—all the MPs and I think everyone in this room knows—that public libraries have become a really important social hub to their community. It has been quite a long time that they have been. We all would know stories, and in the recent challenge with the global pandemic that every jurisdiction has had to endure and work through, some of the things that public libraries have done to get around to make sure they can keep in contact with their communities have been absolutely spectacular. When you think about cases where librarians were ringing their regular customers, particularly elderly people and lonely people—they were ringing them while working from home, making sure they were okay. They were making sure that the public had access to the information they wanted. So I really agree with the first part of your statement, that they are such a great asset, our public libraries, and I am really delighted that we were able to increase their budget, because that means that they will increase the great work that they do and we know they do.

Mr MAAS: Excellent. Thank you. I might leave it there.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Maas. Mr Sam Hibbins, MP.

Mr HIBBINS: Thanks, Chair, and thank you, Minister and your team, for appearing this afternoon. I just want to follow up from some of the Deputy Chair's questions regarding you seeing through the changes to the *Local Government Act*. Now, you mentioned in response that you would be looking at donations reform and that you are awaiting the recommendations of the current IBAC hearing into Casey council. But the reality is those donations reforms were first flagged when that bill was in its genesis stage and then were taken out. Why was that?

Mr LEANE: I think the simple answer, Mr Hibbins, is the actual onset of the IBAC inquiry into Casey and the belief that the work that they will do will produce some recommendations around donation reform and the concern that if we had initiated that at the time of the act—the *Local Government Act*, when it was introduced—we might have actually not done a complete and comprehensive work as far as what needs to occur in donation reform in the local government sector. I take up your air of impatience. I take that up, but what I can say to you, Mr Hibbins, is that there will be donation reform in the local government sector and it will be soon.

Mr HIBBINS: Thank you, That is good to hear, because the onset of the IBAC case—some might have felt that would have warranted more urgency rather than waiting and seeing. Given that it was in the lead-up to the election, you know, we could have even had some interim rules and stay place, but you can take that as a comment. Looking at the Geelong council and, you know, the report into Geelong council, they cited the single-member wards as one of the factors that led to the breakdown in proper governance for Geelong council, citing things like parochialism and councillors not taking their job in terms of representing the whole municipality. Yet the government has gone down the track of having mandated now single-member wards across all councils. Those concerns that were relayed by the monitor or the report into Geelong council and led to their dismissal—are you now concerned that they could be replicated across all councils given the move to single-member wards?

Mr LEANE: There might be a reference to it, but I think to say that the breakdown and the ultimate occurrence of Geelong council going into administration was because of single-member wards might underplay the whole picture of what was actually happening.

Mr HIBBINS: It was a factor.

Mr LEANE: I think for the single-member wards we probably do not want to re-prosecute the argument and, for the MLCs that are here, the long, long debate that happened in the Legislative Council around that particular part of the Act. You know, I will re-prosecute it: I think it gives councillors ownership of one particular area and it gives constituents of that ward a clear indication of who their representative is. And of course we are representatives too. We are parochial about our jurisdictions—of course we are—and of course there will be ward councillors who will be parochial about their wards as well. But I would hope that we can do some work so that councillors and councils work more in a way that they are doing the right thing by their ward and also the right thing by their whole local government area.

Mr HIBBINS: Okay, thank you. I want to move on to the initiative around women building surveyors. Now, in budget paper 2 it says:

Subsidies will be provided to Victorian local government authorities to employ and train new building surveyors, with a particular emphasis on attracting women to this profession.

Is it definitely all dedicated to employing women?

Mr LEANE: Yes.

Mr HIBBINS: Yes. Okay.

The CHAIR: Mr O'Brien?

Mr D O'BRIEN: Thanks, Chair. Good afternoon, Minister and officials. Minister, you received the Victorian local government rating review I believe back in March. When will you be responding and releasing it publicly?

Mr LEANE: There is a commitment to release the rating review before the end of this year.

Mr D O'BRIEN: You are going to do it tomorrow, aren't you?

Mr LEANE: I think you could probably keep guessing.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Well, there are only about 14 days I could guess, Minister.

Mr LEANE: I appreciate it is not far away.

Mr D O'BRIEN: So it is going to be released next week or at least before Christmas?

Mr LEANE: It will be released before the end of this year.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Okay. Parliament handed down its report into the sustainability of rural councils nearly three years ago now. When will rural Victorians get some relief on rates?

Mr LEANE: Mr O'Brien, as for relief on rates, there are two areas that you touched on: rural council sustainability and then regional rates. I think rural council sustainability is an issue that we definitely need to tackle, and I have committed to do some work on that. I have also had a number of conversations with Rural Councils Victoria, and I have heard them loud and clear. You have mentioned a committee report of a number of years ago. I have heard them loud and clear: they do not want any more committee reports, they do not want any more committee references, they do not want any more reviews—they want us to act. So I am looking at ways that will support their sustainability, and I agree that we need to act on that.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Are you considering alternative revenue measures—for councils, I mean, to raise revenue?

Mr LEANE: For rural councils?

Mr D O'BRIEN: Yes.

Mr LEANE: Look, I think there are some issues around rural councils that you would know better than me, I would say.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Yes, absolutely.

Mr LEANE: There are some issues that rural councils have in that they have a population that compares to, you know, one person to about 1 kilometre of road that they have to maintain. I think that is an issue that we need to seriously take into consideration. And they have other challenges as well.

Mr D O'BRIEN: We know the problem very well with rural. Can I go back to overall, though, the question of the rates review. You have had it since March—plenty of time to consider it. What action can the public expect in reforming rates and making them fairer?

Mr LEANE: I am hopeful that when the review is released before the end of the year—and it will accompany the response from the government as to the recommendations—there will be some aspects that please in particular some rural constituents.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Well, I am talking broadly.

Mr LEANE: Broadly?

Mr D O'BRIEN: Yes. Across the state. I will move back to the rates review now. When you say you are hopeful, you are the minister; you have been considering it. You have just said the government is going to respond. Will Victorians see reform that—

Mr LEANE: I am trying to help, Mr O'Brien, because it has not been released yet.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Well, you are just teasing a little bit. You are only showing me a bit of leg.

Mr LEANE: I am trying to be helpful and sort of give you—

Mr RIORDAN: It is your chance for a scoop here. We will get you some free publicity here.

Mr LEANE: Yes, well, I do not want to overbuild it and I do not want to underbuild it. I want to keep it on a level that is—

Mr RIORDAN: A Christmas present for the long-suffering people in the country.

Mr D O'BRIEN: We could probably take a guess. If it is released before Christmas, there might be something good in it. If it is released after Christmas, it is a whitewash. Is that the case?

Mr LEANE: But what happens if it gets released on Christmas Day?

Mr D O'BRIEN: Well, that would suggest there is going to be nothing in it.

Mr LEANE: It is level. No, look, it is a challenging area, but I think we need to take into account that local government rates are 3 per cent of the total tax intake. Local governments do some really good work, as I said before, and they need to have some sort of financial base. So there is a balance. I think there is a balance, and I think people accept that.

Mr D O'BRIEN: I get that, Minister. From what I am hearing you say, we should not get too excited about massive reforms from this review. Is that correct?

Mr LEANE: Well, for me to indicate to you the level of excitement you should have at any time I think would be quite presumptuous of me, Mr O'Brien.

Mr D O'BRIEN: It is Friday afternoon after three weeks of PAEC.

Mr LEANE: I know.

Mr RIORDAN: He is not easily excited, Minister. So if you had some good news on the rates, he would be—

Mr LEANE: I completely appreciate that you have done a great job in sitting here for many weeks.

The CHAIR: And the member's time has expired. Thank you, Mr O'Brien. Ms Pauline Richards, MP.

Ms RICHARDS: Thank you, Minister and officials. I am going to take you back to some of the discussions you were having with Mr Maas earlier around the benefits of public libraries, and specifically I refer you to budget paper 3, pages 94 and 84. I have got to give a quick shout-out to the amazing librarians in Cranbourne, who have been working so hard. I am wondering if you can perhaps provide some evidence on what your understanding is of the benefits of public libraries and why this funding is so important.

Mr LEANE: Thank you, Ms Richards, for that question. I can probably give you some examples. As I stated before, the work that public libraries did during the COVID challenge, the pandemic, was really impressive. I could probably point out some of the individual councils and what they did. The Monash libraries were providing—and are still providing, I have got to say—their story time in multiple languages for children of different backgrounds to enjoy. Yarra Plenty library staff have been doing the regular phone call check-ins to vulnerable members of the community. Can I say, it was not just Yarra Plenty. I think there were many libraries in both metro and rural Victoria that undertook this task, and they saw it as an important part of their role.

Monash council have been providing books for those who were receiving Meals on Wheels. So they partnered up with the Meals on Wheels program to make sure that when someone received their meal from that particular program they also had a book. I suppose there are no good by-products of a global pandemic, but I think there are some learnings, and I think that this was one of them.

Hobsons Bay—I really love this one—partnered with Guitars Gathering Dust to deliver guitars for aspiring musicians. As we all know, people had time on their hands. My understanding is this particular program, Guitars Gathering Dust, do find a way to loan out guitars. I think they work with schools, and I think they had 30-odd guitars that they could not distribute in the way they used to. So they partnered up with the library and, as I said, people with time on their hands could contact that particular library and get a guitar delivered to their home. It probably was a great thing for that particular person who received a guitar; it might not have been so fantastic for the rest of the family. These are the sorts of things that public libraries stepped up to do.

As far as their core business and what they believe their core business is, public libraries have become really important community hubs. Librarians have become so much more than giving information and lending out books. They will have regular people or they will have one-off incidents where they will notice someone does look a bit unsettled or distressed. They will have conversations with them. They will refer them to services such as mental health services, financial services or legal services which actually visit the libraries on any given week or any given fortnight. That said, they see that as their core business. That is what they have been doing, and it is not just during the pandemic that they were in this position.

As you know, we have got toy libraries. They have increased the availability for more toys. I think it is something that we can universally agree to be proud of. As I said, Pauline—if I can call you that—I was actually quite delighted that we managed to increase that budget, and we work closely with a number of stakeholders. We work closely with Public Libraries Victoria, and they do a great job and they are really strong advocates. We work closely with the Australian Services Union. They have a lot of membership in there. One thing about public libraries is—with our building surveyors program where we targeted women, I think we all know the cohort that was probably hardest hit from the COVID challenge as far as unemployment goes was women—the gender balance is 80 per cent women.

Ms RICHARDS: Great, thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. Mr Sam Hibbins, MP.

Mr HIBBINS: Thanks, Chair. Just following on from the women building surveyors initiative, what is the actual funding for? What does the \$6.3 million funding actually cover?

Mr LEANE: Thanks, Mr Hibbins, and I will give you that breakdown. As you said, it is \$6.3 million. It is over two years. It is to give 40 women the opportunity to train to become local government building surveyors. The councils will receive \$75 000 per year for the life of the program. The funding of course will have conditions, and the implementation is still to be determined in consultation with stakeholders. So the initiative will allow 40 female candidates to undertake an advanced diploma in building and surveying or a bachelor of building and surveying. It will support women to start a new career or transition to be fully qualified building surveyors, and it aims to address the current shortage of building surveyors to contribute to Victoria's economic recovery through supporting local construction and infrastructure stimulus measures. I think applications, I can say—we have got a bit of work to do, in saying that, in making sure we are determining the parameters around those applications—for the program will open, a similar answer to Mr O'Brien, before the end of this year.

Mr HIBBINS: Is it new jobs—you will actually have a demonstrated increase in the number of building surveyors? I ask just because of obviously the flammable cladding issue and I think the disastrous privatisation of building surveyors and that role being in the private sector and not so much in the local government sector. Will this program actually go to increasing the number of building surveyors amongst local governments? Will that be a condition of it?

Mr LEANE: Yes. When you say, 'Is it new jobs', they are definitely new building surveyor positions. But what I can say is that councils may have a candidate within their ranks, a woman within their ranks that may have been working in line with the building and planning team that may want to take up this opportunity, so we are not discounting that—we are not discounting that at all. My understanding is, as far as female building surveyors go, we can only find one in our state—I could be wrong. So the goal is for a couple of years time; there will be 41 at least.

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

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Hibbins. Tim Richardson.

Mr RICHARDSON: Thank you, Chair. Taking you back to libraries—reading the play here, Minister—what type of projects have been funded through the Living Libraries Infrastructure Program in the previous years?

Mr LEANE: I will just find the details on that. Thank you, Mr Richardson.

Mr RICHARDSON: I thought you would have paid the dad joke a bit more, but that is all right.

Mr LEANE: Getting there. I just want to get the breakdown of the previous projects. As you know, Mr Richardson, this is a really popular program amongst libraries and local governments. I think I need to give you the breakdown in examples.

In this budget, as I said, there is an additional \$11.1 million for the library infrastructure program over two years. The examples that you would probably know yourself are around how this gives libraries the opportunity to renovate, they can put this money towards mobile libraries as well and it is also an opportunity for new libraries. I have got some examples, which—I apologise—I was looking for.

Cardinia: as I said, I foreshadowed that they actually put some funding towards a mobile library, and as you would understand, that is a really important asset.

Banyule: in Ivanhoe it put \$750 000 towards a project modernising, providing full access to the library. I think making libraries more accessible as far as disabilities go is one of the examples that a lot of libraries have utilised this fund for.

In Whittlesea, in Mill Park, Whittlesea and Yarra Plenty Regional Library collaborated to improve the library infrastructure and functionality to ensure the existing spaces were used more effectively and efficiently so they could deliver their programs to more people, and we were all pretty pleased that that was the case.

In Sandringham there was the redevelopment of Sandringham Library. That increased the library floor space; it nearly doubled it I think, getting back to what the libraries can be enabled to do with the support of this particular fund.

West Wimmera: Edenhope community hub constructed a new community library facility, which is getting back to what I was saying; some of this funding has been utilised to create new spaces and new libraries altogether.

Springvale: the project constructed a new library as part of the community and learning hub in Springvale, and a new library replaced the existing Springvale library.

In Point Cook they expanded Point Cook Library by quite a vast amount—once again, more space to do more group study and things like that.

In Portland, in Glenelg, they used this funding to create a youth area, which gave them the ability to form a small group of young people.

As I said before, libraries are really important social hubs, and they identified this as an area where they needed to have a space for young people to be able to meet.

Mr RICHARDSON: Turning the page, Minister, to the 2020–21 funding rounds for the Living Libraries Infrastructure Program, when is that open to councils? And when will the successful projects be announced?

Mr LEANE: I might actually hand over to the director. Would you like to give Mr Richardson the actual dates and the process?

Mr MORRISON: Thanks, Minister. The expectation at this stage is that that funding round will open in late January and close for applications in early March, allowing for successful projects to be announced by April next year.

Mr RICHARDSON: Fantastic. I better leave my questions there. Thank you very much.

Mr MORRISON: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Richardson. Ms Bridget Vallence.

Ms VALLENCE: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Minister and department, for appearing today. Minister, a newspaper article in the *Age* on 3 November—and this is in reference to budget paper 3, pages 355 and 421—reported vote tampering in the Moreland council election, with allegations of \$500 being offered to people who could bring in 50 ballot papers. There were also warnings of mail theft, and locals clearly were expressing disappointment about the integrity of the elections and that the elections in fact might have been compromised. These matters were referred, as I am sure that you know, to the VEC and subsequently police were called in. Given the budget allows over \$76 million for electoral events, do you think that the Moreland council elections were fair and conducted with integrity?

Mr LEANE: I suppose my response to that is that I worked closely with the VEC commissioner during the election period. It was a challenging election for I think everyone—the candidates and the VEC. The VEC commissioner—and I cannot give you the correct date, but I can get back to you—contacted me to alert me that he had found an issue, where he believed that some of the ballots may have not been signed by the person that they applied to, the actual real person. To his credit—he has some rules that he has to follow. He had to let the declaration go ahead, but as soon as he declared it—and this is his information to me—he alerted VCAT about his challenge to the outcome of that ward in Moreland. He put an application to VCAT challenging the outcome of that ballot, despite him having to declare it, because that is what his role is under the Act. You are correct in saying that the police were informed and the Local Government Inspectorate was informed, and so—

Ms VALLENCE: So what has been done? In terms of that situation, what representations are you making and what influence do you have to make sure this does not happen again? Because it is quite concerning, I think.

Mr LEANE: Well, I do not disagree that it is quite concerning. I think I was about to say that. I think it is very concerning and very disappointing. As I said, VCAT are looking into the issue and the police are looking into the issue. I think it is very disappointing, and if we can get to a point that this does not happen again, then I would be very pleased. But I think it is very fraught for a minister to guarantee anything in this world. I think the aspiration is there, but I think it is very fraught for me to actually guarantee that we can get there. I hope we will.

Ms VALLENCE: Now, the MAV expressed concerns about the timeliness of postal ballots, and indeed the Shadow Minister for Local Government's office was inundated with people concerned about this—votes not been received before the cut-off. No performance measures have been set for this. Why not? And what are you doing to make sure that this situation does not impact people's votes being received and included in the ballot?

Mr LEANE: I think, getting back to it, it was a challenging election. It was the first time that across the state we had the postal—

Ms VALLENCE: Some people's votes may not have been counted.

Mr LEANE: Well—

Ms VALLENCE: It may have impacted the result.

Mr LEANE: that is not true.

The CHAIR: Ms Vallence, could you allow the minister the opportunity to answer the question?

Mr LEANE: I think, you know, just because you say it does not mean it is true.

Ms VALLENCE: Well, how can you guarantee that? Can you guarantee it, Minister?

The CHAIR: Ms Vallence, could you allow the minister to answer your question, please.

Mr LEANE: I think that, as I said, I was constantly meeting with the VEC commissioner; the VEC commissioner was constantly meeting with Australia Post. Actually the feedback was the performance from Australia Post was actually very good, and the VEC commissioner was in a position that he felt that the return was probably a few days earlier than he expected. It was not counted for that.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. The call is with Ms Nina Taylor, MLC.

Ms TAYLOR: If I may direct you to page 84 of budget paper 3, the Growing Suburbs Fund received \$75.2 million to help the interface and peri-urban councils deliver critical local community infrastructure. Can you take us through this funding and what projects it will go towards?

Mr LEANE: Yes, I can, and thank you for your question, Ms Taylor. This is a very, very popular fund, particularly for, as you said, the interface councils, and we have included the peri-urban councils as well. So it has actually increased by—if you take into account the availability to councils as far as the quantum—\$25 million this budget. In June it was announced \$25 million would be available to the eligible councils and then, in this recent budget announcement by the Treasurer, that was increased by \$50.2 million. So the amount is \$75 million.

I can comment on the original \$25 million—some examples of some of the money that was put forward for some of these projects. The Cowes Cultural and Community Centre received \$2.5 million; when construction is complete the new venue will host performances, exhibitions and community events, as well as library services for all those living in Phillip Island. I know the member for Bass is very excited about that particular project. The Orana Community Place early years facility is in Clyde North, so I think a couple of the members on the panel might be just close by to the areas they operate in. That is for access to the kindergarten and parenting support programs, playgroups and essential community health services, such as speech and occupational therapy. The Mernda social support service facility received \$1.24 million. This will provide a purpose-built home for support programs for older people in Mernda. There is a new pavilion at Diggers Rest Recreation Reserve, which received \$2.5 million. The new pavilion will replace the outdated buildings and include female-friendly change rooms and better facilities for women and girls sport, and community events.

So, Ms Taylor, they are some of the examples of the 28 projects that were delivered. I think in the history of this particular fund, there have been many, many facilities, including libraries, community centres, art and cultural facilities, parks and reserves, kindergartens, early learning and recreational facilities since this program was initiated. It has been essential because, as you would know, these areas are experiencing a great deal of growth. And this is the opportunity for those particular councils to bring forward the really essential infrastructure for those growing communities. That is the whole goal of this particular program. As we said, we

included the peri-urban councils with the interface councils as being eligible because they have found themselves in the same position where people are moving into their particular local government area catchment. I am actually really pleased that we were able to increase this particular fund to that extent, because they are really important facilities for people that are moving into these areas and a lot of them are young families, as you would know. Access to these sorts of community centres, libraries, reserves and parks is such an essential part of bringing up a young family.

Ms TAYLOR: Indeed. Looking at the total investment, how much has been provided to councils through the Growing Suburbs Fund and how many projects have received funding as a result?

The CHAIR: I am sorry to cut you off there, Ms Taylor, but the clock beat you.

Minister, that concludes the time we have set aside for the consideration of the local government estimates. 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. The committee will now take a short break before moving to consideration of the suburban development portfolio with you.

I declare this hearing adjourned.

Witnesses withdrew.