

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the 2024–25 Budget Estimates

Melbourne – Friday 24 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

**Necessary corrections to be notified to
executive officer of committee**

WITNESSES

Natalie Suleyman MP, Minister for Youth; 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 now 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, any 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 this evening and other committee members.

Witnesses will be provided with a proof version of the transcript to check, and verified transcripts, presentations and handouts will be placed on the committee's website.

I welcome the Minister for Youth the Honourable Natalie Suleyman as well as officials from DFFH. Minister, I am going to invite you to make an opening statement or presentation of no more than 5 minutes, after which time committee members will ask you some questions. Your time starts now.

Natalie SULEYMAN: Thank you, Chair, and thanks also to the committee for this opportunity to present on what we are doing right across the youth portfolio, including our government's investments in 2024 and 2025 of the Victorian state budget.

I begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the lands we are on today and pay my respects to their elders both past and present.

Visual presentation.

Natalie SULEYMAN: I have met so many young Victorians, and what always stands out is their passion to do better. They drive our state towards a stronger, fairer future, both for their generation but also the ones that will follow them. That is why the youth portfolio is focused on empowering young people and building the foundations for them to live healthy lives. To achieve this we are supporting all young people, no matter their background, postcode, circumstances or ethnicity, and we are committed to raising the voices of young people so that they have a say on the policies, programs and services that they use and that impact them.

Over the past 12 months the youth portfolio has increased youth engagement and maximised young people getting involved in their local communities. We have invested in statewide youth programs totalling close to \$9 million a year and providing young people with the skills to develop leadership and mentoring opportunities. We are partnering with the community sector, and we have supported more than 70,000 young people through the Engage! program. This is on top of our FReeZA program, which has delivered over 640 youth-led events across our state. A big shout-out to all organisations supporting these programs, and I note also the team at YACVic here today.

We also have a range of targeted programs that are reaching young people who need extra support with their mental health, social isolation and educational engagement. For example, the Le Mana Pasifika project continues to increase access to opportunities and services by engaging over 800 Pasifika young people and their families every year. Since 2018, in partnership with Scouts Victoria, we have delivered a total of 22 new scout hall projects, and in 2023–24 we have completed five upgrades, with another due to be finished very soon. This means that more young people have new and upgraded scout halls so that they can build their skills and also the

local community can achieve access. We are also continuing delivering our government's youth strategy *Our Promise, Your Future*, partnering with local governments to support new or upgraded youth hubs in Geelong, Nillumbik and Wyndham. These one-stop hubs will make local services more accessible for more young Victorians.

This year's Victorian state budget continues investment in programs that are creating better outcomes for our young people. The Innovative Support to Reengage Young People package is investing \$3.6 million to continue the Living Learning partnership program. The Living Learning partnerships help young people with mental health challenges to get them back on track, providing wraparound services for mental health and of course educational support as well. This builds on the government's \$15 million investment in the Living Learning partnership, which has delivered really strong results and outcomes for our young people that have been through this program. Our government is also investing \$1.7 million in the Koori Youth Council, the representative body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people. The KYC does important work promoting youth participation and important advice to government on issues that matter to First Nations young people.

Over the next 12 months we will continue our commitment to the Victorian young people through rolling out the new YouthNav, an online platform that will provide practical skills and information for young people on issues – for example, how to manage money, find a new job and access important health and wellbeing services – and continuing our work with the Victorian Youth Congress, a youth advisory group who advocates and represents issues that matter to young people, and we are going to be delivering our flagship programs and initiatives supported through the Investing Early Where It Matters package from the 2023–24 state budget.

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

Danny O'BRIEN: Thank you, Chair, and good afternoon, Minister and team. Minister, you mentioned the Innovative Support to Re-engage Young People program. I am wondering whether you or the Secretary can provide a list of the programs that were funded for that initiative and the amounts of funding for each one.

Natalie SULEYMAN: Thank you, Mr O'Brien. I will allow Louise to go first, and then I will continue.

Louise PERRY: Thank you. Sorry, Mr O'Brien, I am not the Secretary; I am the Deputy Secretary.

Danny O'BRIEN: Yes. I am just used to saying 'secretary'.

Louise PERRY: Are you asking – sorry, just so I am clear – for a breakdown of the output in Youth?

Danny O'BRIEN: Yes, for the innovative sport to re-engage young people program.

Louise PERRY: Yes, okay. So that is the \$30.5 million –

Danny O'BRIEN: The \$3.6 million.

Louise PERRY: Okay. That is the Living Learning program, which supports young people specifically with mental health conditions to re-engage with education. I have got a little bit more information on that if you just bear with me. It is a great program.

Danny O'BRIEN: So, it is a single program?

Louise PERRY: It is, yes. It is \$3.6 million for a single program.

Danny O'BRIEN: Okay. Probably the question is: has there been an evaluation done on that program and its success?

Louise PERRY: Yes, there has. In the youth portfolio we always draw on evidence to design and implement policy and programs that really drive those positive outcomes for young people. Living Learning is one of five partnerships that address disadvantage delivered in Victoria. They combine public, private and not-for-profit resources, and they really work to address the complex social issues. The Living Learning program was designed in 2019–20 in response to evidence that early school leavers and young people that were disengaged from education, employment and training were really struggling with their mental health

complexities. The program design is based on the key worker model of care that was successfully demonstrated by Victoria's Cradle to Kinder program. Each participant receives individualised, tailored support from a qualified youth or social worker.

Danny O'BRIEN: Can I ask how many young people have actually been supported through that program?

Louise PERRY: Yes, sure – 143 people.

Danny O'BRIEN: 143 – and is that the same figure for next year, going forward?

Gerry GOSWELL: We are working through the details of 2024–25 with Melbourne City Mission and Hester Hornbrook Academy as our delivery partners, but we expect up to 90 young people will be supported through the further budget investment. It will depend exactly on how Melbourne City Mission and Hester Hornbrook choose to use the resources, but we expect it to be up to a further 90, which would build on top of the 143 already supported through the program.

Louise PERRY: I think it is worth saying, Mr O'Brien, that two of the three evaluation reports on the Living Learning PAD have been released. The third will be due in early 2026, and they are available on the DTF website.

Danny O'BRIEN: Okay. I hate to be brutally numerical here, but \$3.6 million for 90 young people is \$40,000 each. Is that an unfair characterisation?

Natalie SULEYMAN: Can we get you just to brief, if you can?

Gerry GOSWELL: Yes. As part of the Living Learning PAD, we are required to work with the Department of Treasury and Finance to determine the return on investment that is resulting. There has been an initial independent evaluation conducted by Urbis, and then there is going to be a second evaluation conducted through 2024–25, and that includes actually quantifying the return on investment as a result of the investment. It is actually quite substantial when you look at the diversion of those young people away from other emergency services, including mental health and emergency department presentations. There is a direct correlation between the investment that goes in through this program and then savings not in this portfolio but through other more acute services also funded by the state government.

Danny O'BRIEN: Has the assessment done with DTF found that it is good value for money? Is there a benefit–cost ratio done with that?

Gerry GOSWELL: Yes. Two of the three evaluation reports have already been released, Mr O'Brien, and they are available publicly on DTF's website. Then there will be a third evaluation report completed, and we expect that to be released in early 2026. So all of that data becomes publicly available in terms of the outcomes of the investment.

Danny O'BRIEN: In the short time I have got, though, has there been a benefit–cost ratio as part of those evaluations?

Gerry GOSWELL: There has, Mr O'Brien. I would need to come back to you, if I can, on whether I have got those numbers here. I can come back through the hearing.

Danny O'BRIEN: Sure. That would be great.

Natalie SULEYMAN: Can I just also add, if I may, I have seen firsthand when I have actually visited Hester Hornbrook Academy the impact that this program has made. Last year, together with the Member for Albert Park Nina Taylor MP, we got to meet a number of students who otherwise would have dropped out of secondary college in normal settings without the appropriate support at Hester Hornbrook. It is really important to have those wraparound services – if I can – and provide that extra support so that young kids, whether it is mental health challenges or whether it is self-esteem or other health problems, are able to actually complete their schooling. Within that program they are actually supported to transition into upskilling and actually secure jobs as well. It is really important that we get –

Danny O'BRIEN: I do not doubt that, Minister. It is worth asking the question as to whether it is good value for money.

Natalie SULEYMAN: I just wanted to point that out. Absolutely.

Danny O'BRIEN: Particularly given we have got a housing, rental and cost-of-living crisis at the moment, how is the portfolio monitoring youth homelessness and, probably more particularly, what initiatives in the 2024 budget are aimed at reducing or addressing youth homelessness?

Natalie SULEYMAN: Mr O'Brien, thank you very much. This is something that, as you know, not only young people but all Victorians are facing – the challenges of secure, affordable housing, whether it is in Victoria or nationally as well. Let me be pretty clear: we have a \$50 million Big Housing Build investment, which was announced in 2023, and it is supporting –

Danny O'BRIEN: For youth?

Natalie SULEYMAN: Let me just unpack that for you, Mr O'Brien. It is supporting the construction of new homes for young people.

Danny O'BRIEN: Sorry, how much did you say it is?

Natalie SULEYMAN: We have a \$50 million Big Housing Build investment, announced in 2023, and it is supporting the construction of more than 130 new homes for young people across the state. This includes sites to support specific needs, also for our Aboriginal young people and young people leaving care, which is really important. So far –

Danny O'BRIEN: Can I ask how many of those homes –

Natalie SULEYMAN: If I can just unpack for you, Mr O'Brien, because this is really important –

Danny O'BRIEN: But so is my time, Minister, and I have 20 seconds left.

Natalie SULEYMAN: We have already seen \$200,000 – if I could, because this is really to your question –

Danny O'BRIEN: Yes, I am sure it is. How many have been –

Natalie SULEYMAN: for Village 21 in Preston to deliver youth-related homelessness –

Danny O'BRIEN: I am sure it is really important, Minister, but I have got 8 seconds left.

Natalie SULEYMAN: It is supporting six young people. So we are actually –

Danny O'BRIEN: Could you tell me how many of those homes have been built?

Natalie SULEYMAN: As I said, we will continue to invest in and support young people when it comes to delivering secure and safe homes for young people.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. We will go to Mr Tak.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Minister. I would like to talk to you about the youth performance measure. Minister, can I direct you to the 2024–25 'Department Performance Statement' and the measure related to the participation of young people in social and economic life and in decision-making, on page 45. Can you step the committee through the variants for those two measures?

Natalie SULEYMAN: Thank you very much, Mr Tak, for your question. I appreciate the opportunity to talk about the work that we are doing across this portfolio supporting and engaging with young Victorians. On the measure that you have stated – the participation by young people in programs that provide opportunities to be involved in social and economic life in their communities – the target for 2023–24 was 241,700, and I am really pleased to report that we are predicting a significant exceeding of the target. We are expecting an outcome of 320,000 participants – that is 320,000 young people, which is an increase of over 30 per cent. We know that there have been some challenges in recent years, but this result shows that young people are really

bouncing back and getting involved in their communities or youth-led organisations. As a government, that is something that we are extremely pleased to report. I know, for example, that we have a strong partnership with the centre of multicultural youth – that is CMY – and of course our youth affairs council, YACVic, who are here today. The Regional Presence Project provides funding to support four regional offices. So it is not just supports within Melbourne but also our regions, and that is why we have these organisations in Ballarat, Morwell, Swan Hill and Warrnambool.

Those offices and the teams do a great job engaging with young people and also supporting the broader youth sector within those communities. Their work is very important, and that work was recently displayed when YACVic undertook a regional tour in Warrnambool to engage with local young people. YACVic spoke with the regional advocacy group and of course connected with employment pathways, which are really important supports for young people, and met with staff from Foyer Warrnambool, which provides youth services to young people at risk of homelessness. The Regional Presence project is just one of the ways that we are backing our young Victorians to get involved. As I said, regardless of your postcode – regardless of living in Melbourne or in regional Victoria – you do have those supports. Additionally, on the measure of participation by young people in programs that support young people to be involved in the decision-making processes within the community, the target for 2023–24 was 2710. We are predicting we will again beat that target and exceed the outcome, with about 3200 young people – so exceeding it by almost 20 per cent. This really does show young people are not only getting involved, they are also contributing to designing and leading programs that support them and of course their peers and their local communities.

Recently I have been out in the community meeting a range of young people, whether that is at the Victorian Youth Congress – the induction, bringing new VYC members on board, and they are a diverse bunch of young people – or going out to Melton to hear about some of the programs that we have there for young people and of course right across the west. I think it is really important that our programs do have a catchment that spreads through Melbourne to regional and rural Victoria. What always shines through when I do meet young people is their passion and determination. They are really driven to make a real difference in the local communities if given half a chance. We want to make sure that we back that dedication and they do have a seat at the table, really empowering young people so they can have those meaningful discussions and raise important issues in meaningful ways.

One of the ways that we are making sure that young people are involved is designing and running programs and projects in the youth portfolio. One that we designed was the youth strategy, a real stand-out piece that provided a process for young people to be part of that process but also to make decisions about the process, which is really important – for instance, when we were able, with our youth congress, to be part of the rollout of our youth navigator. I will talk a little bit about our youth navigator; it is something that we are very proud of, this one-stop shop that will provide online information, very shortly, to assist young people in key skills, whether it is financial literacy or how to access important health and wellbeing supports. I am really proud that young people, and in particular the youth congress members, were part of that process in actually developing the youth nav. We know that was one of the strategy's priorities, that young people are respected and involved in decisions in their communities. We are delivering on that through those programs, including Youth Fest, which provide small grants, but they are important grants because they are led by young people and of course community organisations to deliver specific events, again really addressing and designed for and led by young people.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you, Minister. Could you take the committee through how the government is supporting the participation of young people more broadly and which programs are underpinning that work?

Natalie SULEYMAN: Thank you, Mr Tak. This is a really important question. I would like to just talk about a few programs, if I may, that really drive how we are boosting youth participation across this portfolio. One of those has been one that I mentioned earlier, the Victorian Youth Congress, which is a group of diverse young Victorians aged between 12 and 25 that work with government and advocate on issues that matter to them and their peers. Let me say they are a young, diverse, multicultural group representing all parts of Victoria, which I am really pleased about. They are very excited, extremely so, to undertake projects and of course also to provide advice to government. I have had the opportunity to meet the youth congress members and see them personally grow throughout the year. It is fantastic to see them develop their confidence, their networking skills and really connecting to other young people. It is in that way that the congress plays a really

important role and it has become much more active in really fostering and developing projects and advice to government, and in particular working with my office.

I really do believe that when we do provide a platform and space for young people to speak about their ideas and create that change in that comfortable setting – when they are involved – it really does highlight how young people become much more active and positive when they are part of the process. As I mentioned before, it is always great to meet with the youth congress. We have a number of members, as I said, that are returning this year, and of course there are new members for this year for 2024. Congress plays a really integral role. It is really impressive to speak to each of them and hear about their aspirations, their challenges and some of the issues that they care about. What I would like to do during the time on congress is probably look at how we can work with other members this year and create better outcomes for young people and perhaps have that opportunity to have our congress involved in much more events throughout the year. Giving them those opportunities is really important.

I also want to highlight the work of the YMCA Youth Parliament. I know some members here are no strangers to our Youth Parliament. It is another brilliant and fantastic program that provides a special and impactful experience for young people and a dedicated place –

The CHAIR: Apologies to interrupt, Minister. Mr Tak, your time is up. We are going to go to Mr Puglielli.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon. Looking at the ‘Department Performance Statement’, page 45, ‘Youth’ – that output item – one of the intentions is to actively encourage young people to participate in their local communities. Minister, I am sure you in this role meet with many groups advocating for young people, as you have outlined. Have any of these organisations raised the prospect of lowering the voting age to 16? Even off the top of your head?

Natalie SULEYMAN: Thank you for that question. I meet with many youth organisations and young people, and we talk about many issues. There is always an opportunity to express a position of course. I do want to make it clear that we continue to support young people to be actively involved and really take part in those opportunities, whether it is this specific issue, which I do want to point out is a matter for the Electoral Matters Committee in relation to the specific question that you raised. But I can talk about the youth portfolio, and we do get, as I said –

Aiv PUGLIELLI: But they have raised it? Sorry, to clarify your response – they have raised it with you?

Natalie SULEYMAN: As I said, there is always an opportunity, and I really am very pleased to have conversations in relation to broad issues about young people and some of the issues and challenges that are faced by young people. Youth organisations will have, I would say, various voices when it comes to this issue, but as a government we are committed to empowering our young Victorians – and that is really important – with tools and platforms so that they can continue to raise their voices and really be part of those opportunities. Whether it is, as I said previously, the Victorian Youth Congress or whether it is the YMCA Youth Parliament and other youth organisations, it is always an opportunity for not only youth organisations to raise these matters and other matters before the minister or my office.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: I am getting the sense that that is a no. Could you indicate why?

The CHAIR: Mr Puglielli, I have pulled you up before about putting words into the minister’s mouth. You have asked the question –

Members interjecting.

The CHAIR: Excuse me, Mr O’Brien. You have asked the question; the minister is providing you with an answer. Your time is up.

Minister and officials, thank you very much for taking the time to appear before the committee on this portfolio this afternoon. 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 very short break before beginning its consideration of the veteran’s portfolio at 4:05 pm.

I declare this hearing adjourned.

Witnesses withdrew.