

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the 2024–25 Budget Estimates

Melbourne – Wednesday 22 May 2024

MEMBERS

Sarah Connolly – Chair

Nicholas McGowan – Deputy Chair

Michael Galea

Mathew Hilakari

Lauren Kathage

Bev McArthur

Danny O’Brien

Aiv Puglielli

Meng Heang Tak

WITNESSES

Ingrid Stitt MLC, Minister for Multicultural Affairs; and

Brigid Sunderland, Deputy Secretary, Social Policy and Intergovernmental Relations, and

Lucy Toovey, Executive Director, Multicultural Affairs, Department of Premier and Cabinet.

The CHAIR: I declare open this hearing of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee, and I ask that mobile telephones please be turned to silent.

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

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

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

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

I welcome the Minister for Multicultural Affairs the Honourable Ingrid Stitt and officials from the Department of Premier and Cabinet. Minister, I am going to invite you to make an opening statement of no more than 5 minutes, after which time committee members will ask you questions. Your time starts now.

Ingrid STITT: Thank you, Chair. I would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we meet, the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation, and I pay my respects to elders past and present.

Visual presentation.

Ingrid STITT: I am pleased to appear before the committee as the Minister for Multicultural Affairs. Here in Victoria we are a proudly multicultural society and one of the most culturally diverse places in the world. Victorians have more than 300 ancestries, speak over 290 languages and practise almost 200 different faiths. The multicultural affairs portfolio supports Victoria's multicultural and faith communities by celebrating diverse traditions, fostering community connections and social cohesion, addressing racism and vilification, providing targeted supports to refugee and newly arrived migrant communities and working with communities and the VMC to improve social, health and employment outcomes. I will note that these focus areas require a whole-of-government effort, which is why the multicultural affairs portfolio was moved into the central agency of the Department of Premier and Cabinet on 1 February this year.

This year has been a really difficult time for many within our multicultural communities, particularly our Jewish, Palestinian and Muslim communities. The conflict in Israel–Gaza is having far-reaching effects around the world and indeed here in Victoria. This government recognises that our Muslim, Jewish and Palestinian communities are suffering immense grief and distress. It is why we are working hard to continue to ensure our communities feel safe and supported and why we will always reject the spread of hate and division within Victoria. That is why last year we provided \$6 million in funding directly to our Muslim and Jewish communities for initiatives that combat anti-Semitism and Islamophobia, which have no place in our state. It is an absolute priority of mine as Minister for Multicultural Affairs to ensure that every single one of our diverse communities feels welcomed, safe and heard.

We are continuing to invest in our diverse communities. Since 2014 the Victorian government has proudly invested more than \$600 million through the multicultural affairs portfolio to support our diverse multicultural communities. This year's budget builds on the legacy of investment by the Labor government in the multicultural affairs portfolio, with \$64.6 million in output expenditure over the financial year. Over the past 12 months we have delivered \$5.6 million to fund 678 multicultural festivals and events; \$8.2 million in

funding for over 30 multicultural infrastructure projects, with more to come this financial year; \$6 million in community-led initiatives to counter Islamophobia and anti-Semitism; and \$4.5 million to enable targeted supports for African communities and Victorians of African heritage.

Work is well underway to deliver all of our election commitments from 2022, with funding to continue rolling out through this financial year, including \$40 million for improved community facilities; \$12 million for community festivals; \$9.8 million to support the Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria and the Bachar Houli Foundation, build on the *Victorian African Communities Action Plan* and support multicultural museums; \$6 million to deliver anti-vilification campaigns; and \$1.5 million for a multicultural media grants program.

This year we are building on this investment in the multicultural affairs portfolio. There is \$5 million for the *Victorian African Communities Action Plan*, which will deliver two successful components, being the employment broker initiative and the alcohol and other drugs outreach program; \$4.4 million in support for newly arrived communities, which includes funding of 41 community hubs across Victoria which help connect newly arrived migrants, mostly women and children, with services and social networks; and \$4 million for anti-vilification measures to support the release of Victoria's first anti-racism strategy, which we aim to release this year. We are proud of our diversity, and our government will continue to support our multicultural communities to thrive. Thank you very much, Chair. I look forward to taking questions.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. The first 8 minutes is going to go to the Deputy Chair.

Nick McGOWAN: Thank you. Thank you, Minister. Minister, in the questionnaire that we received, the response indicated that one of the specific objective indicators for your portfolio is 'Decrease experiences of discrimination'. I think we can all agree with that. Can you outline for the committee, Minister, what objective measures you are actually going to use to ascertain whether that has been achieved or not?

Ingrid STITT: Thank you for the question. Obviously it is an important focus for the portfolio. We do not want anybody in the Victorian community to experience discrimination. We are doing a lot of good work. We have been funded \$4 million over two years in this budget, Mr McGowan, to continue the important work of our Anti-Racism Taskforce, and that reaffirms the work of the Allan Labor government in our commitment to developing a new statewide anti-racism strategy that will help prevent and address many forms of racism in the community. We have been doing a lot of work recently and talking closely with many of our faith communities, and there is no question that they are reporting an increased level of discrimination and vilification, which of course is very distressing. We want to make sure that people are not subjected to this kind of behaviour. I am really pleased that we have had a budget allocation of \$4 million. That is going to allow the Anti-Racism Taskforce to continue that great work. It is co-chaired by Sheena Watt, our colleague in the upper house, and also Nick Staikos, who is the parliamentary secretary to both the Premier and me as multicultural affairs minister.

We have also provided important funding to both our Jewish and the broader Muslim communities to tackle antisemitism and Islamophobia. As I mentioned in my presentation, sadly, international events have really seen a significant spike in the reporting of both antisemitism and Islamophobia across the community. That is why it is important that our government continues to support those communities to have pathways to redress for that kind of behaviour but also to send a very strong message to the Victorian community that we will not tolerate hate speech – there is no place for it here in Victoria. We will continue to support our diverse communities in feeling not just welcome but safe and heard in terms of their priorities as communities and part of what is proudly a very diverse state.

Nick McGOWAN: Minister, thank you for the answer. I am not sure that I actually heard a measure in there. I do not disagree with what you have said. What I am trying to understand is how we are going to measure whether in fact you have hit the target or not, because I would anticipate that if one of the objectives is to decrease experiences of discrimination, one would expect that this time next year you are reporting back to us that in fact there has been a significant and massive increase for the previous 12 months. That would be a logical conclusion given what we have seen certainly for the last 12 months to today. So how are you going to measure it?

Ingrid STITT: Yes. Well, I hope that is not the case, but as I have just very frankly taken you through, unfortunately we have been hearing from many in the community that there has been a significant rise in vilification and hate speech. I think the point I would make about this is that this is a whole-of-government effort, so it is not just in the multicultural affairs portfolio that we need to tackle these challenges. For example, the Attorney is doing very important work consulting with the community about how we might be able to strengthen our anti-vilification legislative framework. You would be familiar with that, having heard the Attorney talk about these matters in the Legislative Council. But it is also important that in other portfolios like, for example, education, we are providing important programs and supports to our multicultural communities right across the community to make sure that they feel safe, that they feel engaged and that they also know what their rights and responsibilities are. It is important work, it is not easy work, but we are very committed to continuing the effort, and I think that the budget outcomes in the multicultural affairs portfolio are pleasing in the sense that they will give us more ability to do that work in a more targeted way. As I mentioned, the taskforce that we have, the Anti-Racism Taskforce, is going to be a big part of that effort.

Nick McGOWAN: Thank you, Minister. The \$4 million you mentioned, that is over two years. That commences in the next financial year, 1 July 2024, is that correct?

Ingrid STITT: Correct.

Nick McGOWAN: And will that fund specific new projects, or will that fund pre-existing projects?

Ingrid STITT: What that will fund – the taskforce will, I hope in the coming months, be able to finalise the anti-racism strategy that we hope to be able to release this year. Of the particular priorities that are contained in that strategy, we will make sure that there are programs as a result of this allocation in the budget that we are targeting towards the priorities in that strategy. So it is work that has not been completed yet, but it does give us the ability to finalise that strategy and release it to the public. It has been the subject of a lot of consultation already through the good work of that taskforce that was originally set up by Ros Spence when she was the Minister for Multicultural Affairs. They have been able to do some fantastic work in cross-portfolio recommendations around how we are going to best support our multicultural communities to be free from discrimination and racism.

Nick McGOWAN: Thank you, Minister. So it is correct then to say that none of that \$4 million is for ongoing projects, it is for new projects and of course as you mentioned the taskforce – is that correct?

Ingrid STITT: That is right. That is how we envisage we will acquit the budget allocation.

Nick McGOWAN: Thank you. There is \$6 million, as you have mentioned, identified to fund countering discrimination and prejudice towards the Jewish and Islamic communities. Can you tell me how much of that was expended in 2023–24 and how much is budgeted to be expended in 2024–25? That is, Minister, to you or the Deputy Secretary.

Ingrid STITT: The election commitments that were recently announced – so in November last year we announced \$8 million for the Jewish and Islamic community groups across Victoria –

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. We are going to go to Ms Kathage.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you, Chair, Minister and officials. Page 165 of BP3 has got information there about Victoria's whole-of-government approach to multiculturalism. We know that over the last 10 years Labor has backed multicultural communities in the state, and that is a sustained interest and investment. I know certainly that is the case in my community. I was really proud to host you, Minister, recently for a multicultural round table, and I know that community members were excited to have you there and to share with you their experiences and their ideas and priorities. To me, I just think Victoria's diversity – it is one of our greatest strengths, 100 per cent. Can you share with me, Minister, this budget investment here, how is that supporting our multicultural and multifaith communities in Victoria?

Ingrid STITT: Thank you very much for that question. I was delighted to come out and join you in your electorate to meet with those wonderful community members, and it was a great conversation. I think that one of the things that has struck me the most as have I moved around the state and met with various multicultural groups is just how active they are in the community, not just in their own communities but really the amount of

work they put in to making their communities better places for everyone. So it was really fantastic to be able to come out and join you for that round table.

The government absolutely believes that our diversity is one of our greatest strengths as a state. We are at the point now in our history where 50 per cent of us were either born overseas or have a parent that was born overseas, which is quite extraordinary when you think about it in those terms and something to be celebrated. So I think I already mentioned in my presentation that we have over 300 ancestries and we speak over 290 languages and practice many, many faiths. Our population is the fastest growing in Australia, and we are becoming increasingly diverse. The budget does invest \$102.9 million across the whole of the Victorian government. That includes \$13.4 million in the multicultural affairs portfolio into initiatives that directly support our multicultural and multifaith communities. That funding includes an additional \$17 million into the *Victorian African Communities Action Plan* through both the multicultural affairs portfolio but also the education portfolio, supporting programs to help people get into work and helping people get the assistance they need for alcohol and other drug issues. But it is also going to continue our really successful homework clubs that really keep young people of African heritage engaged in school. That is a fabulous program. I know that the Deputy Premier is really proud of the work that our schools are doing to support those kids staying engaged.

We have also invested over \$8 million in health, legal and social supports for recently arrived migrants and refugees, with \$4 million through the multicultural affairs portfolio and \$4.4 million through the health portfolio. There is over \$9 million for the incredibly successful community language schools, which are not only places for learning but they are also places where people can connect with other people in their communities. There is nearly \$12 million for multicultural supports in the early childhood education settings, something dear to my heart, and \$4 million, as we were just discussing, for the anti-racism strategy, and that is really important work that will be ongoing. There is \$6 million for the security upgrades at Victorian faith-based schools, which the Deputy Premier has announced in the education portfolio.

I will also draw your attention to the output funding of \$64.6 million. Part of this delivery includes our election commitments from last year's budget, and that includes \$50 million over four years to the Multicultural Community Infrastructure Fund, something that is incredibly popular for community groups to access so that they can build, renovate or upgrade their community infrastructure. There is an investment of \$12 million over four years to support the multicultural festivals and events program. That really is about backing our multicultural and multifaith community organisations to hold their cultural events in their local communities and really celebrate their heritage. There is \$1.5 million worth of grants for multicultural media organisations, who play a really important role in getting information out to our incredibly diverse Victorian community, and \$3 million over four years as part of the *Victorian African Communities Action Plan*.

This budget is really a budget for helping families, and this includes families in our multicultural communities. Right across government, over a range of different portfolios, we are supporting our very diverse multicultural communities.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you, Minister. It is amazing, as you said, how active groups are, and there is also so much community service that different groups are involved in. I think about BAPS in Mill Park providing support during COVID and certainly further north, so much support to people that are doing it tough. You mentioned the *Victorian African Communities Action Plan*, so I would like to focus on Victorian African communities if I can. That action plan, I can see on page 74 has received some funding there. What will that funding go towards? What are we doing under that action plan?

Ingrid STITT: Thank you, that is a great question. Obviously it is an important point to make that Victorian African communities are incredibly diverse within their own group. There are over 50 different nations who bring a very unique experience to Victoria and very different sorts of skill sets and ideas about how best to work with their communities. Since 2019 the *Victorian African Communities Action Plan* initiatives have provided a number of really important programs, including tailored employment, education and health supports to over 7000 members of Victoria's African communities.

As I mentioned previously, the budget invests over \$17 million across the education and multicultural affairs portfolios into continued delivery of the action plan. In the multicultural affairs portfolio there is \$5 million which will be invested into the two significant programs, the Employment Brokers initiatives and the alcohol

and other drugs outreach program. The Employment Brokers program has received \$6.9 million in funding since 2020–21, including \$2.8 million through the 2024–25 state budget, and the alcohol and other drugs initiative, which is called Project Sunrise, has received \$3.6 million in funding since 2021, including \$1.705 million in this year's state budget. As I mentioned earlier, the \$12 million investment into the continuation of our very successful homework club provides great support for not just students of African heritage but also their parents. It is really important that we continue our efforts to keep our Victorians of African heritage engaged and supported.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you. On the Employment Brokers program that you mentioned, and we know there are some higher rates of unemployment, how is this program being received by members of Victoria's African communities?

Ingrid STITT: It has been very successful so far and has been very well utilised. Since 2020–21 the Employment Brokers program has supported 1784 jobseekers of African heritage to secure either employment or training outcomes. The reason why this program has been so successful is because it provides grants to go directly to support organisations that already have significant reach into the Victorian African community, and these organisations receive funding to engage the hosts from the community to find employment and training opportunities. Often these organisations are led by African community leaders and members of the community, and we know how important it is to provide that culturally appropriate support for these sorts of programs. I think that is probably one of the reasons why there has been such a great uptake right across the diverse group of community organisations for this important program. In just the last year we funded six organisations, including Afri-AusCare, Somali Women and a number of other important organisations.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Kathage and Minister. Mr Puglielli.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon. As the situation in Gaza worsens and following Israel's invasion of the Palestinian territories, as you have noted, Islamophobia and antisemitism are on the rise in Victoria. Far-right extremism also continues to present a real threat to security and social cohesion in the community. As you have noted already regarding the anti-racism strategy, that will need corresponding legislation, so could you just give the committee an update, Minister, on when we can expect that legislation to be introduced?

Ingrid STITT: Thank you for your question, and these are really important issues. I referenced some of the work of the Attorney in this space, but it is certainly not for me in my portfolio to be able to take that question about legislation. The \$4 million investment in the budget is money that will go towards initiatives to prevent and address racism and discrimination. I think I took Mr McGowan through the taskforce that we have that has established for a number of years that is working on our anti-racism strategy. That work is distinct from the work that the Attorney is leading on anti-vilification legislation.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: I appreciate that distinction that you are drawing.

Ingrid STITT: Yes.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: I suppose they do interact nonetheless, as you have said.

Ingrid STITT: Of course.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: So do you anticipate that the strategy will be introduced before the legislation or simultaneously? Do you have a view to that?

Ingrid STITT: I am not in a position to speak for the Attorney in relation to these matters. It would not be appropriate for me to weigh in on that.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: I respect that, but I mean the strategy without the legislation is –

The CHAIR: And the Attorney, Mr Puglielli, will be appearing before us on Friday.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Very true. I might move forward. The \$6 million for an anti-vilification campaign that you mentioned in the presentation at the beginning, could you go into a bit more detail on what that is, what is in that?

Ingrid STITT: So that is the \$6 million going towards supporting communities to combat antisemitism and Islamophobia. Is that the one you are referring to?

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Could you go into a bit more detail? That is the one, yes.

Ingrid STITT: Yes, sure. The Jewish and Islamic community organisations have been allocated \$3 million each to support measures that will combat discrimination and also equip people to support them during what I am sure we would all agree are pretty difficult times. Support for the Islamic community has been to a range of different organisations, including the Islamic Museum of Australia, the Islamic Council of Victoria, the Melbourne Grand Mosque and the Board of Imams.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. A very good mosque there with Melbourne Grand Mosque indeed.

Minister and officials, we have come to the end of our session for this afternoon for this portfolio. I would like to thank you all for appearing before the committee. The committee will follow up on any questions take on notice in writing, and responses are required within five working days of the committee's request.

The committee is now going to take a short break before beginning its consideration of the planning portfolio at 4:45 pm.

I declare this hearing adjourned.

Witnesses withdrew.