

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the 2023–24 Budget Estimates

Melbourne – Thursday 8 June 2023

MEMBERS

Sarah Connolly – Chair

Nicholas McGowan – Deputy Chair

Michael Galea

Paul Hamer

Mathew Hilakari

Lauren Kathage

Bev McArthur

Danny O’Brien

Ellen Sandell

WITNESSES

Ms Harriet Shing MLC, Minister for Equality,

Ms Peta McCammon, Secretary,

Ms Louise Perry, Deputy Secretary, Fairer Victoria, Engagement and Coordination, and

Mr Michael West, Director, Equality, 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 please be turned to silent.

On behalf of the Parliament, the committee is conducting this Inquiry into the 2023–24 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 today is protected by parliamentary privilege. However, 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 today and other committee members.

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.

I welcome the Minister for Equality the Honourable Harriet Shing as well as officers from the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing. 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 commence with their questions. Your time starts now.

Harriet SHING: Thank you, Chair. I will be as brief and as disciplined as I can, notwithstanding the fact that this is a subject matter which deserves an extensive conversation not just in this committee and not just within the budget but more broadly as part of ongoing commitments to equality, to visibility and to access to opportunity and participation for everybody.

Thank you for this opportunity. I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land upon which we meet today, and I pay my respects to elders past and present. I also want to acknowledge any and all Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander leaders or emerging leaders who are part of this process, who have been part of the budget discussions on delivering the *Pride in our Future* strategy or who are part of our wonderful LGBTIQ+ communities around the state.

Visual presentation.

Harriet SHING: Since we established the equality portfolio in 2015 we have been really proud to stand with LGBTIQ+ Victorians. We have here in Victoria the first Pride centre in Australia. We have moved to outlaw the harmful and damaging conversion and suppression practices. We have amended the *Equal Opportunity Act* to remove discrimination for vulnerable groups who have struggled and continue to struggle with isolation, discrimination and harassment. We have amended the *Crimes Act* to address the stigma-based increased nature of penalties for certain offences. We have amended the births, deaths and marriages Act to make sure that people can have access to the documentation that reflects who they are. *Pride in our Future* is a road map which sets out a 10-year plan for the way in which we develop and deliver the sorts of opportunities for inclusion, for visibility, for capability and capacity, legal protection and a sector that is self-sustaining.

I will move over to the next slide, if we can, please. We are not through the work yet. The work of equality and making sure that we are not taking a backward step – particularly in line with recent events that seek to exert pressure against vulnerable groups, individuals and communities – must go on. It has been really important as part of this portfolio that we have delivered on the strategy to establish Safe Spaces programs in Western

Victoria and that we are continuing the trans and gender-diverse peer support program and rolling out free LGBTIQ+ statewide inclusion trading. We have also seen – and I know having seen a number of you at a range of events that have been celebrated as a consequence of grants and assistance from the government – marches, the rainbow and Pride street parties, the ChillOut Festival and a range of rural and regional events, and we have supported more than 28 LGBTIQ+ leaders through the leadership program.

Next slide, please. We see that there is a range of policy and program output targets. When we look at the release of funds for the Victorian Pride Centre and new funding for initiatives allocated in the budget, we can see that there has been a record investment that we are determined to deliver not just through infrastructure and capital but also through the delivery of a range of initiatives – access to programs, supports, events and places that are safe, that are inclusive and that provide people with an opportunity to participate in community and everyday life with dignity and with recognition.

Next slide, please. So we have further investment in this year's budget. \$22.5 million acquits our election promise: the promise to make sure that we could boost Rainbow Tick accredited community and mental health providers. We know that access to culturally safe mental health support services is of crucial importance to LGBTIQ+ people, who face a range of disadvantages when it comes to living with stigma and discrimination and the consequences of ongoing and persistent discrimination. Eight million dollars is to strengthen LGBTIQ+ groups, events and organisations and to make sure that we continue to support people over their entire lives. Young LGBTIQ+ people become old LGBTIQ+ people, and making sure that we can help older LGBTIQ+ people age well in their homes is really important. And again, the Bendigo Queer Arts Festival has been part of that as well. I have only got 2 seconds, so I am going to leave it there. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, Minister. I am going to invite Mr McGowan to ask questions for the next 8 minutes.

Nicholas McGOWAN: Thank you, Minister. The 2022–23 Victorian budget included a target of 30 per cent of LGBTIQ+ grant program recipients located in regional and rural areas, which is very important, I am sure you would agree. This budget shows an expected outcome for 2022–23 of 40 per cent in regional and rural areas. This obviously demonstrates an anticipated demand for those grants in these areas. The future budget now has a target of only 25 per cent of recipients located in regional and rural areas in 2023–24. My question is, noting the recent cancellation of the LGBTIQ+ event in Wangaratta and the ongoing issues for the rainbow community in regional areas: why has this target been cut despite popular demand for the grants?

Harriet SHING: Thanks, Mr McGowan. It is a really good question, because one of the things that we are doing is actually sailing over the top of these targets. In the recent round of grants that was delivered on 17 May with the Premier – that was IDAHOBIT – it was 30 per cent of the 24 recipients of grants from rural and regional Victoria. So we are seeing an achievement of engagement with rural and regional Victoria and with intersectional parts of our LGBTIQ+ communities that really does demonstrate a longstanding commitment to make sure that every part of our state is able to be inclusive of LGBTIQ+ people. I want to take a moment – I will be very quick on this: the cancellation of the Wangaratta event last week was incredibly distressing for so many people, particularly after the joy of Wangaratta's first family Pride day, which I was privileged to attend a couple of months ago. At the Gippsland Pride Gala, attended by 470 people last Saturday night in Warragul, we did a shout-out to them and we live streamed –

Nicholas McGOWAN: Minister, I appreciate your answer, but I will have to stop you there, only because I know you are as interested in the community as I am. So I will ask the next question, because I think it is probably more fruitful for the committee.

Harriet SHING: to the Wangaratta location. There was a lot of grief, and we are determined to continue that work to support them in rural and regional Victoria. Thank you, Mr McGowan.

Nicholas McGOWAN: I do appreciate that. Thank you. The 2022–23 Victorian budget included a commitment to establish a community legal centre specialising in the LGBTIQ+ community. On 31 March 2023 the government announced that \$1.6 million in funding for the community service had been awarded to the Fitzroy Legal Service. This award was against the other bidder for the contract, which was the LGBTIQ+ community run Thorne Harbour. Fitzroy Legal Service is not an LGBTIQ+ community organisation, and this has caused some concern among those in the community. Additionally, it is understood that Fitzroy Legal

Service may continue to operate out of their offices rather than the Pride Centre as was promised. LGBTIQ+ equality programs and policies are critical. Why did the government break its promise that these services, the legal services as provided by the Fitzroy Legal Service, would not be run out of the Pride Centre?

Harriet SHING: Thank you, Mr McGowan, for that question. As you rightly point out, there was a \$1.6 million investment over two years from the 2022–23 budget to support those specialist LGBTIQ+ legal services and to drive those improvements across the sector and the way in which people engage with seeking and receiving advice about their rights and exercising of those rights. There was an open and competitive grants process, and that was managed by the Department of Justice and Community Safety. As a result of that process Fitzroy Legal Service, but also in partnership with Queerspace, was selected as the successful applicant to establish that LGBTIQ+ legal service. Fitzroy Legal Service has significant experience and expertise as an accredited legal centre that supports LGBTIQ+ Victorians, Mr McGowan, and I was in fact one of the people who ran a volunteer night service at the Fitzroy Legal Service back in the day. It was about 700 years ago, so do not ask me what the code for the front door is. But we also want to make sure that LGBTIQ+ lived experience is part of the work we are doing, and that is where Queerspace comes into the mix, and that is where, again, culturally safe, appropriate and accessible legal services for LGBTIQ+ people are so important.

Nicholas McGOWAN: Will it be based out of the Pride Centre, though? That is really what I am getting at, as you know.

Harriet SHING: This is where, again, we are continuing discussions about the delivery of that service from the Pride Centre. We have got the base for the Fitzroy –

Nicholas McGOWAN: Because, as you know, that was critical and that was part of the promise.

Harriet SHING: Well, the Pride Centre itself has got, as I hope you know – and if you have not been, I would be delighted to walk you through what is an extraordinary building – a range of different support services and organisations, from the queer archives right through to Joy FM. So this is where again the legal service will have a presence there.

Nicholas McGOWAN: Joy FM – that is a great segue, Minister.

Harriet SHING: Oh, okay. Great.

Nicholas McGOWAN: In respect to funding of Joy FM, does the government have any intention, in the allocated budget for the forward estimates, to fund any of the programs from Joy FM?

Harriet SHING: Sorry, the acoustics are really strange in here. If you would not mind repeating the question.

Nicholas McGOWAN: Yes, that is also me. Has the government allocated any funding for Joy FM community radio over the forward estimates?

Harriet SHING: We have, as I said earlier in my introductory remarks, made a record investment, including to community organisations. Joy FM has been receiving about \$200,000 to continue its operations, which we committed to prior to the last election. But in addition to that, Joy FM was one of eight organisations that shared in funding of around \$900,000 to provide support, including through the supports that were generated through Switchboard and other organisations off the back of an increased spike in demand for access to services following a range of very, very damaging transphobic events.

Nicholas McGOWAN: Thank you, Minister. Forgive me for butting in there, but I need to keep asking questions.

Harriet SHING: No, you are all right.

Nicholas McGOWAN: The 2022–23 Victorian budget included a target of 25 Victorians completing the LGBTIQ leadership program.

The CHAIR: Mr McGowan, could you please slow down.

Nicholas McGOWAN: I will if you give me more time. If you give me more time, I will be happy to.

The CHAIR: I know you are trying to get through, it is just it is very difficult to understand what you are saying.

Nicholas McGOWAN: The budget shows an expected full uptake in the 2022–23 program of 25, and you mentioned this in the slides before.

Harriet SHING: Yes.

Nicholas McGOWAN: This obviously demonstrates a popular demand for the program. However, the future budget proposes discontinuing this performance measure altogether. Why has the government proposed cutting support for the leadership program?

Harriet SHING: The leadership program has been a project that has delivered extraordinary benefit, and it is now about making sure that our leaders can work across the pathways, the networks and the opportunities for skills and expertise development in a range of other ways. So when and as we build the capability of our communities through events, through organisation and through funding, including through rural and regional communities, we are in a position to grow and develop leadership pathways through those mechanisms.

Nicholas McGOWAN: Thank you. The government has stated that extending Victoria's anti-vilification provisions would involve, and I quote, 'considerable government investment above existing levels'. Does the 2023–24 budget include funding to begin this process?

Harriet SHING: Anti-vilification legislation sits with the Attorney –

Nicholas McGOWAN: I understand.

Harriet SHING: and – I am not sure – you may well hear from her on those questions. The work is, however, well on foot to engage with LGBTIQ+ organisations. I have been meeting with a range of individuals and groups, most recently at the Pride Centre but of course as part of the task force and justice working group, to talk about what it looks like to create something which is able to deliver legally what we want it to. There is no point in developing a product that will not provide people with the legal protection that is needed as part of this response to anti-vilification challenges. Again, it will take time. We want to do it properly. Doing this as a sugar-hit press release does not actually lean into the challenges of creating anti-vilification legislation that does the job and does it well and does it properly and does it in a way that is robust.

Nicholas McGOWAN: Can you speak to the grant programs? Can you tell us which regional areas saw the greatest uptake?

The CHAIR: Apologies, Mr McGowan. Your time is up. We will go to Mr Galea for the next 11 minutes.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Chair. Afternoon again, Minister. Afternoon, officials. Minister, if I can start by referring you to budget paper 3, page 174. The output summary table here shows \$10.5 million in funding for LGBTIQ+ equality policy and programs in the current financial year. I understand that this investment follows the launch of this portfolio. Can you please outline some of the things that have been achieved with this funding to date?

Harriet SHING: Sure. Thank you, Mr Galea. This funding is incredibly important for a range of reasons. When I take you through some of these examples, it will hopefully become clear that not only is there an economic benefit to the sorts of initiatives that we funded, there is also a vitally important improvement in social cohesion, in participation – in the sorts of intangibles that have a very, very significant impact on the lives and wellbeing of LGBTIQ+ people. What we do know is that when we fund events such as the street party and Victoria's Pride – these grant streams that are about regional pride events – we see that, going back to the economic point, for every dollar that was spent on Melbourne Pride there was a return of \$1.48 to Victoria, or \$1.34 to Melbourne. We know that there is also incredible benefit in bringing people together of all ages and of all backgrounds. We know that, for example, young people, old people, people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, people living with disability and neurodivergent folk often find it difficult, as LGBTIQ+ people, to find spaces and places and opportunities to connect. There were I think 67,000 people who were part of events – I think was 39,000 people at the street party alone. This is also then about allies. It is

about the people who love us, who want to see us thrive and who want to support us but who also want to celebrate everything that is so wonderful about LGBTIQ+ stories and culture and identity. We have supported the successful delivery of over 170 events run by LGBTIQ+ communities, and we have supported, as I said, tens of thousands of people to get involved. We have got organisational grants that are being supportive of 24 local organisations of which, as I said, a third are from rural and regional Victoria.

We have events also that are very emotional for people. This was borne out in a range of ways at the most recent Gippsland Pride Gala, an event that we are so proud to be able to support, an event that was also affirming but bittersweet. It was affirming because there were many people there, a number of whom spoke to me, who were out as their true selves for the very first time. It is incredibly challenging to think that there were people who spoke to me that night in their 40s and 50s who were out as themselves for the first time. The power of these sorts of events should never be underestimated – the power of visibility and opportunity to be seen and to have yourself recognised and welcomed and accepted rather than tolerated as something that is a mystery and a concern and something to be alarmed about. These are the antidotes to the shame that LGBTIQ+ people live with. These are the antidotes to the sorts of contributing factors that lead to greater instances of mental illness issues, compromises to wellbeing and problems associated with violence and with difficulties in securing and retaining employment.

We are in large part not as visible as we need to be in a range of metrics, including the way that data is gathered, and that is also where the strategy *Pride in our Future* is about making sure that when and as questions are asked that gather information about the community, we know where and how LGBTIQ+ people need access to supports or to services or to recognition. We saw the coroner amending the way in which reports are addressed to include LGBTIQ+ identity for the first time last year. We have seen commitments from the Commonwealth around changing the census to a way that actually stops LGBTIQ+ identity from being invisible, because questions will be asked and people can volunteer that information where otherwise questionnaires have not enabled that to occur.

We also want to make sure that we are building self-sufficiency, as I mentioned in my presentation, and internal capacity and resilience for LGBTIQ+ organisations, services, groups and networks are a big part of that. That, Mr McGowan, goes to your question about the leadership group. The program itself is able to be embedded in the way in which organisations are supported to work on that trajectory of success, of inclusion, of scale and of long-term planning and priorities. That, Mr Galea, is a very longwinded way of saying that we have record investment, we have seen extraordinary progress, but there is always more work to be done.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Minister. A very fulsome and passionate answer, so thank you for that. Speaking of more work to be done, there is funding in this year's budget as well. Can you please outline what this additional funding will provide, this further funding for the next financial year?

Harriet SHING: Absolutely. Thank you so much for that question, and I did cover that in significant part in my opening remarks, but I might start with pride in aging, because this is incredibly important. As I said, young LGBTIQ+ people become old LGBTIQ+ people. Much as I would like to be able to put myself into suspended animation, I know that is not going to happen. But we also see significant disadvantage where people cannot access residential aged care that affirms their identities –

Danny O'BRIEN: You will be forever young, Minister.

Bev McARTHUR: You look younger every day.

The CHAIR: Well said, Mrs McArthur.

Harriet SHING: Mr O'Brien, let us pop that on the record. Thank you, Mr O'Brien.

Danny O'BRIEN: You think I am not listening, but –

Harriet SHING: No, no. Nobody ever thinks you are not listening, Mr O'Brien. What I would say though is that we need to take care of people, embrace people and support people in all their identity for the entirety of their lives – of our lives. And this then means that Rainbow Tick accreditation, making sure we can build on that work in the health and hospital system to take that out to the provision of mental health services and making sure, through the work that we have done with the Rainbow Ready road map and the work with

councils, that these partnerships on the ground mean that we are continuing to deliver on understanding where and how those needs are arising – that data question I talked about earlier – but also making sure that when we talk about pride in aging we actually mean creating change on the ground and in people's lives.

I want to acknowledge the work of Anne Tudor, who with her late wife Edie created the dementia walk not far out of Ballarat. She and Edie fought for a really long time to have their relationship recognised, and they were so profoundly important in the way in which we now understand the needs of aging folk around identity, around being able to have residential aged care that recognises who you are, who you love and what you need without causing or being part of that often very dislocating process of people having to recloset themselves, that pain and that trauma – after a lifetime of trauma – that nobody deserves.

It is also about gender-affirming health care, and we want to continue to work through that as we work through the strategy and make sure that we are supporting community organisations who are so germane to that work. Again, the Pride Centre is a really big part of that and the community organisation supports fund and the events, including the LGBTIQ Legal Service. These are things which are based within that hub of the Pride Centre but which also go into rural and regional Victoria. Mr McGowan, yes is the answer, just for avoidance of doubt.

Nicholas McGOWAN: They will be based in the Pride Centre. Okay.

Harriet SHING: Yes, yes. Sorry, yes. So this is again something that we just want to be very respectful and careful and purposeful about doing, but it is about partnerships. It is about empowerment. And it is also about recognising that the world is changing, that the civil rights achieved by many generations of people, who were classified as criminals for being who they were, have now moved on to a world where young people – and I say that with, you know, a slight element of irony because I once thought that I was in that category and clearly I am no longer – do not actually see gender or sexuality as any kind of issue. They do not see that there is any point of distinction by which somebody is lesser because of who they are or who they love. That is a wonderful thing, but it is a fragile thing. That is why we need to continue to support this change – the momentum of this growth and this inclusion – as we move towards better outcomes, including those that are set out in the strategy. This is part, however, of an overall government investment that recognises disadvantage, that celebrates diversity and that is committed to ongoing respect, recognition and visibility.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Minister. If I can draw your attention to budget paper 3, page 40, could you please outline how the initiatives in this budget align with the objectives of the LGBTIQ+ strategy?

Harriet SHING: Absolutely. \$22.515 million: making sure that we are delivering a range of initiatives across the whole-of-a-lifetime experience; making sure that we are supporting people, including through the trans and gender-diverse peer support programs and ministerial task force; making sure that we are supporting community events, particularly in rural and regional Victoria; and delivering on Pride in our Future and those outputs.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Minister.

The CHAIR: Apologies, Minister. The last 3 minutes belong to Ms Sandell.

Ellen SANDELL: Thank you, Chair. I also want to ask about anti-vilification. I understand that the legislative change is not within your portfolio, but the Attorney-General did say that your government committed to an 18-month time frame for the protections. As I think Mr McGowan has mentioned, it does not look like there is actually anything in the forward estimates to implement that change. I am just wondering why that funding is not allocated in the budget.

Harriet SHING: The work is already underway to talk with communities about what is needed, but this is not just about anti-vilification legislation, as important as that is. We are committed, as you would be aware, to banning the straight-arm salute, the Nazi salute, but this is also about the really complex work of anti-vilification and the fact that it needs to sit –

Ellen SANDELL: I guess because it is complex, it needs funding, though, right?

Harriet SHING: It needs to sit alongside the social and the cultural piece, and it is also part of an ongoing legislative program. When we work towards developing what that program looks like, what that legislation

looks like, this is the work that happens within DJCS. We need to work through that consultation process to understand the sort of legislation that will address these shortfalls, that will understand the nature of the problem, because as I said in response to a question earlier, just slapping out a couple of ideas about the way in which we can prevent or sanction or understand or deter this sort of behaviour is really difficult. This is where, again, the Attorney is working on that. There are a number of ministers who are working on that. I am part of that work. This sits across the whole of the government. The Premier has spoken very clearly and articulately about why this needs to happen. The minister –

Ellen SANDELL: I think we all understand that – we all support it – it is just confusing as to why there is not a budget allocation for it. I guess that is the question.

Harriet SHING: Because this is part of the consultation in order to understand what it is that we need to develop. There is no point in putting an amount of money in for a solution that we think will work when it may not be what it is that we need and how we are going to deliver on those outcomes. That is a false expectation.

Ellen SANDELL: Okay, thank you for that explanation. Is it true that the Pride Events and Festivals Fund has been discontinued?

Harriet SHING: No.

Ellen SANDELL: Okay. In terms of Safe Schools – obviously I am very supportive of this and the ongoing funding for this – Victoria still has laws that allow discrimination against the queer community in certain non-government schools and services: it is still legal to discriminate against LGBTIQ+ students and clients. How is the government proposing to support those people in that legal environment?

Harriet SHING: There is a range of supports that exists, including through our record funding with organisations. As I said, \$900,000 was provided to eight organisations following the uptick in demand as a result of transphobic and homophobic conduct, and that work continues. There is a whole-of-government response to the way in which vulnerable groups and cohorts, including LGBTIQ+ people, can access support.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. Apologies for stopping you there.

Harriet SHING: Thank you for the indulgence, Chair.

The CHAIR: Minister and department officials, thank you very much for appearing before the committee today. The committee will follow up on any questions taken on notice in writing, and responses are required within five working days of the committee's request.

I understand that this topic on equality and some of the things discussed here today some viewers and some listeners might find a little bit distressing. Rainbow Door is a free service of Switchboard, so for anyone who wishes to reach out, you can call on 1800 729 367 or you can even send a text to 0480 107 246.

The committee will now take a short break before beginning the consideration of the portfolio for regional development at 2:40 pm. I declare this hearing adjourned.

Witnesses withdrew.