

# **PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE**

## **Inquiry into the 2023–24 Budget Estimates**

Melbourne – Wednesday 14 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 Natalie Suleyman MP, Minister for Youth,

Ms Peta McCammon, Secretary,

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

Mr Anthony Plummer, Executive Director, Veterans and Youth, Fairer Victoria, Engagement and Coordination, 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 is protected by parliamentary privilege. However, comments repeated outside 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 Youth the Honourable Natalie Suleyman as well as department officials from the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing. You are very much welcome. Minister, I am going to invite you to make an opening statement or presentation of no more than 5 minutes, then this will be followed by questions from the committee.

**Natalie SULEYMAN:** Thank you, Chair, and thank you to the committee for the opportunity to present on the youth portfolio, including our government's investments through the 2023–24 Victorian state budget. Can I begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land we are meeting on today and pay my respects to elders past and present.

**Visual presentation.**

**Natalie SULEYMAN:** The youth portfolio is focused on empowering young people and providing access to the opportunities and supports they need to achieve their goals. Young people make up 17 per cent of the Victorian community, and they make a real difference in our state. In the youth portfolio we aim to bring their enormous potential and insights to our work. To do this we are providing education, training, skills development and career pathways for young people and prioritising the needs of young people facing disadvantage. We are supporting young people to have their say by elevating their voices, and we are prioritising the needs of young people facing disadvantage, including Aboriginal and multicultural young people. In August last year we launched Victoria's first youth strategy: *Our Promise, Your Future*. The strategy sets out a plan to support young people to participate in all aspects of Victorian life in a meaningful way, supported by directions from across government. Over 2000 young people, stakeholders and community members contributed to the consultation for our strategy. I am pleased to note that as part of the youth strategy we are delivering a new life skills resource for young people this year. I have asked the Victorian youth congress to lead in the naming of this piece as part of their role consulting on this project.

The youth portfolio also delivers six community support groups, who engage with thousands of young people and community members from Afghan, Somali and South Sudanese backgrounds, delivering in Dandenong, Casey, Cardinia, Melton, Brimbank, Wyndham, West Heidelberg, Werribee, Flemington and Kensington. The government also provided opportunities for over 220,000 young people to increase their civic and economic participation by supporting over 200 organisations through the Advance, Engage! and FReeZA programs. We

are also continuing to achieve better social outcomes in innovative and evidence-based ways, including through delivery of the Living Learning partnership, addressing disadvantage. In partnership with Hester Hornbrook Academy, this provides young people with access to education pathways.

The 2023–24 state budget gives Victorians the support they need to access opportunities and play a role in their communities. The ‘Investing early where it matters’ package provides \$23.4 million to support young people facing disadvantage, including those in rural and regional Victoria. We are also investing in programs which are shown to improve social and economic outcomes for young people. This includes the Marram Nganyin Aboriginal youth mentoring program, which provides Aboriginal young people with access to tailored, community-led mentoring for support each year. It also includes a community support groups program, the Le Mana Pasifika program and the youth alcohol and other drugs outreach program, which will continue to increase access to opportunities and services for over 5600 young people from multicultural backgrounds. The Regional Presence project will expand youth participation and building the voices of over 1500 young people in rural and regional areas and growth corridors.

The 2023–24 state budget also delivers upon the government’s election commitments in the youth portfolio, committing \$1 million to improve wellbeing and connection for young Victorians. This includes a \$942,000 investment in the future development and refresh of a further six Scout halls to promote youth participation and engagement. This builds on the \$5.5 million invested in Scout halls as part of the government’s 2018 election commitments. We are also supporting young people experiencing homelessness through Fusion on the Mornington Peninsula, where the need for housing support remains high. I am very proud of our government. We are focused on putting young people at the heart of our work and providing them with the services and supports they need to achieve their goals.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Minister. We are going to go to Mr McGowan for the first 8 minutes.

**Nicholas McGOWAN:** Thank you, Minister. I am just taking a look at your budget here. It seems that 2022–23 had \$32.6 million for youth, and that target was exceeded to \$34.4 million, but this year it is \$28.1 million. Why is that?

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Sorry, where are you looking, Nick?

**Nicholas McGOWAN:** Budget paper 3, page 188. I am just trying to understand why the budget for youth has been cut.

**Natalie SULEYMAN:** Just one moment, please. Thank you very much for that question. I will explain. The committee can agree that Victoria’s young people are not just the business of the youth portfolio. We have seen greater investment across government over the years to support young people and from across portfolios, so it is multilayered. And some of the variance between the 2022–23 and 2023–24 funding amounts reflect both the natural conclusion of time-limited investments in the portfolio and lapsed programs. This includes our 2018 election commitment of \$5.5 million over four years to build and upgrade fantastic scouting facilities across Victoria, which comes to a close on 30 June. However, we have funded Scouts Victoria to deliver an additional six Scout halls with upgrades in this budget, and the committee will note that is in budget paper 3, page 49.

Can I take the opportunity to also note the value of our investments to Scouts Victoria and their halls. Recently I had the opportunity to travel to Ballan for the official opening of their Scouts hall and to hear firsthand the difference that our investments have made to Scouts Victoria. I heard this story from one of this Scouts. A young Scout said to me that their old building actually had the toilet block at the back of the site –

**Nicholas McGOWAN:** Minister, I would love nothing more this afternoon than to sit here and listen to you tell me about the toilets being blocked in another country. But with respect, what I am actually after is, as you would call it, more layers in your funding, because what is concerning me here in Melbourne, Victoria, Australia, is the amount of funding you have got for youth. I understand that you have got some recurrent expenditure that maybe you have stopped or some one-off expenditure in respect to the Scouts. I just want more. Surely, as the minister, you would want more too. You don’t want more funding, Minister?

**Natalie SULEYMAN:** I will just continue to say, and if I could just conclude on that –

**Nicholas McGowan** interjected.

**The CHAIR:** Mr McGowan.

**Natalie SULEYMAN:** The value and investment when it comes to our partnership with Scouts Victoria has been valuable, not only for Scouts Victoria but also for those local communities as well. Another contributor to the variance was our investment in supporting young people in flood-affected regions as part of our flood relief package delivered in 2022–23. Of course, again, I have seen firsthand the value of those grants and the fact of the significant impacts the floods have had on our regional communities. Just last week I had a chance to visit Seymour to meet with Mitchell Shire Council to discuss –

**Nicholas McGOWAN:** Closer to home. This is good, Minister.

**The CHAIR:** Mr McGowan, the minister is answering your question.

**Nicholas McGOWAN:** The minister is also filibustering. I know it is late in the afternoon, but I am being very tolerant, I think, so far.

**The CHAIR:** Mr McGowan, you have asked the question.

**Nicholas McGOWAN:** I am so tolerant – almost worthy of a medal.

**The CHAIR:** Mr McGowan, you have asked the question. You cannot tell the minister exactly how to answer your question. She is being relevant to your question.

**Nicholas McGOWAN:** I certainly do not want to hear about foreign countries or things I have not asked about. That is what I do not want to hear about.

**The CHAIR:** Minister.

**Nicholas McGOWAN:** I do not think it is unreasonable. Minister, youth grants are increasingly important to the need of youth, as I am sure you no doubt agree. However, there still remains some uncertainty around the total number and specific grants in this space – that is, your portfolio. Can you provide a complete list of all grants provided under the youth portfolio?

**Natalie SULEYMAN:** Sorry, which page are you now referring to?

**Nicholas McGOWAN:** The entire portfolio, the entire budget.

**Natalie SULEYMAN:** Look, as I indicated in my opening remarks, we have made an investment to young people in Victoria. The ‘Investing early where it matters’ package provides \$23.4 million to support young people facing disadvantage, including those in rural and regional areas of Victoria. We have seen that investing in programs improves social and economic outcomes for young people. When you actually make the investments earlier on, we have been told that it does make a real difference in the lives of young people. But I will ask Anthony if he can continue to provide some further details in relation to this question.

**Nicholas McGOWAN:** Please, Anthony.

**Anthony PLUMMER:** Thank you, Minister.

**Bev McARTHUR:** Save us.

**Nicholas McGOWAN:** Save us all.

**Anthony PLUMMER:** Mr McGowan, I can take you to –

**Nicholas McGOWAN:** Save me from myself, Anthony.

**The CHAIR:** Mr McGowan, it is late in the day, but you will afford courtesy to the minister and witnesses before us.

**Nicholas McGOWAN:** I think this is courteous. Anthony, please.

**The CHAIR:** Mr McGowan, what I am trying to say to you is that your behaviour is becoming out of order. Please control yourself. Mr Plummer.

**Anthony PLUMMER:** Thank you, Mr McGowan, for the question. I might take you first to the Engage! program, which in 2022 the following 101 local government and community organisations received three-year funding through the 2022 to 2024 Engage! program: funded organisations included 59 organisations delivering the program across rural and regional Victoria and 42 in Melbourne. I can take you through, Mr McGowan, the Alpine shire, which received for the Alpine Youth Moving Forward program \$135,000.

**Nicholas McGOWAN:** Perhaps in the interest of time, Anthony, would you be able to provide that list to us, because obviously the number is over 50? Unfortunately I do not have time for 56 to be read aloud, but if you could take that on notice, thank you, Anthony, that would be great.

**Anthony PLUMMER:** I will see what information I can provide.

**Nicholas McGOWAN:** Perhaps the information that is in front of you – or the entire folder will do. We could start with that.

**The CHAIR:** Mr McGowan, now is not the time to be acting childish. If you have a question, could you please ask it.

**Nicholas McGOWAN:** Certainly, Chair.

**Natalie SULEYMAN:** I just wanted to add further just for the committee members that grants are published each year in our annual report for the awareness of the committee.

**Nicholas McGOWAN:** Fabulous document. Minister, the 2022–23 budget included a target – I am quoting: Participation by young people in programs that provide opportunities to be involved in social and economic life in their communities ... The target was 240,000. This target was achieved apparently.

**The CHAIR:** Mr McGowan, your time has expired. I will go to Mr Galea.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon, Minister, and good afternoon, officials. Minister, I would like to ask you about community support grants. This is budget paper 3, page 49, under the heading ‘Investing early where it matters’. Minister, could you please outline and provide some information to the committee on what these community support groups are?

**Natalie SULEYMAN:** Thank you very much for that important question, Mr Galea, and your interest in this important topic. We know that due to a range of reasons young people from multicultural backgrounds can be particularly vulnerable to disengagement from education and employment opportunities, and as a result these young people require more culturally appropriate support to ensure that they are connected with government services and of course community programs and opportunities. I am very pleased to share with the committee that this year’s 2023–24 state budget allocates \$23.4 million over four years to the Investing Early Where It Matters package. This package includes a continuation of the six community support groups that provide support to over 3400, whether they are South Sudanese, Somali or Afghan, young people and families in their local communities from the north, west and south-east of Melbourne.

The community support groups are local. They are community-led initiatives supporting young people and their families. We know that they are also trusted within their communities. They are known community leaders, and their bicultural youth workers are employed to work with young people and most times with their families as well. Those community-based workers help address each young person’s needs through case management support and of course those important referrals to community services or agencies, because we know that for some of the young people from multicultural backgrounds language can also be a barrier. We know we have a high number – 80 per cent – of our communities that come from a non-English-speaking background, and to be able to provide these supports with a trusted youth worker that speaks their language as well is absolutely integral. It is integral not only for young people but for their families. To be able to case-manage and provide those supports and those important referrals to other community services and agencies within their local communities is absolutely integral.

Our community support groups also deliver a range of other activities and services at a local level, and one that I know most committee members here would be extremely proud of is youth mentoring. We know the value of mentoring in someone's life when they are young, and providing those opportunities and that advice and support is absolutely, again, integral. Sport and recreation activities are also important in our local communities, capability and leadership building and parenting programs to support mums in their communities as well, and that is something that I know is very important in particular to single mothers as well.

We know that our six community support groups – three that work with our South Sudanese community – in Dandenong, Casey, Cardinia, Melton, Brimbank and Wyndham do tremendous work each and every day for the benefit of young people in their communities. A further two community support groups work with Somali young people and their families in West Heidelberg, Werribee, Flemington and Kensington, and the sixth support community support group supports the Afghan community in Dandenong and of course south-east of Melbourne.

I had the opportunity to visit the Dandenong community support group with my colleague Lee Tarlamis earlier this year, and we were able to see firsthand the excellent work of our youth workers and what they are doing to provide real support for young people and their families, led by the Centre for Multicultural Youth, and let me say, this is an organisation that just does so much work with our multicultural young people across Victoria, not only in metro Melbourne but also within the regions. The Dandenong community support group is also a hub that provides young people from South Sudanese backgrounds access, as I said earlier on, to those culturally appropriate supports, connections and referrals, and each case is assessed because we know that young people have different needs and support levels from each other.

This model has proven to be immensely successful. We know that our community support groups are supporting thousands – and I mean thousands – of young people across Melbourne each year and really providing them with those supports and opportunities so that that they can actually thrive in their local communities and be able to get through education and, if it is not education, to be linked into proper skills and proper employment opportunities. I think that is really integral for our young people – being able to access those services and programs – and, as I said, some of our young people from our multicultural communities do require that extra support in this space.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you, Minister, and it is particularly good to hear about the Dandenong CSG too and the amazing work that they are doing there. Can I also ask: do you have any other examples of some of the work that these CSGs are doing and some of the benefits they have been providing in their communities?

**Natalie SULEYMAN:** Yes, absolutely, and thank you again, Mr Galea, for that question. We know that the key role of these programs is absolutely about supporting multicultural young people. Our community support groups work directly with over 3400 young people annually, as I said, through case management and assessment, including referrals to education, legal, health and human service providers as well. More broadly, we are also delivering more than 15,000 annual activities and programs – things such as youth mentoring sessions; weekly homework clubs; leadership opportunities, which are so important for our young people; and sport and recreation for their health and wellbeing. Of course there are community engagement opportunities as well. Whether it is volunteering in your local not-for-profit community organisation or participating in local, state or federal politics as well, they are also part of that process of providing opportunities and of course engagement.

A great example of this was the My Sister's Keeper program led by the Centre for Multicultural Youth and developed in consultation with young women aged between 15 and 19 from the South Sudanese community. The project connected 12 young women who were neither attending school nor working with mentors in their community. Through this they were able to deliver activities like workshops on positive relationships, goal setting and of course boundaries and values within their communities. Some of these young women were also able to access camping, swimming, paintballing and go-karting, which for most would have been a new activity, something they would not have experienced previously. This program created a space for young women to connect and build positive relationships with older women who could mentor and guide them. It is also about giving young people confidence, and that is something that is really important in this program. It is about providing young people, whether from the South Sudanese community or other multicultural backgrounds, with that confidence and those life skills that are so important. That comes through mentoring so that they are guided through a healthy and happy journey in their lives. This is one of many examples of the

community support group program: supporting young people in practice and providing practical solutions for our multicultural young people.

We have also found that the community support groups have strong reputations in their communities. They really become key connections of trust between organisations, young people and government. That is really another important element to this: delivering this program by trusted community support groups that have a reputation of supporting and helping young people. That word of mouth also gets out in those local communities and provides confidence and trust amongst young people, where they can share some of their challenges and what they require – some of those supports that they may need. Also for their families I think it is really important. I did talk about single mothers as well from some of these communities that require awareness of what services are available in their local communities. So these community support groups become integral not only for young people but also for their families to connect to agencies and service providers and are a real game changer when it comes to providing support. As I said previously, those young women from 15 to 19 from the South Sudanese community –

**The CHAIR:** Apologies, Minister. I am going to go to Ms Sandell for the last 3 minutes.

**Ellen SANDELL:** Thank you, Minister, you have talked a lot about providing opportunities for young people to be involved in public life, and no doubt you meet with many really politically engaged young people. What is your position on lowering the voting age so that 16- and 17-year-olds can voluntarily vote in state elections?

**The CHAIR:** Ms Sandell, that question I do not think is entirely relevant to the inquiry before us and the budget at hand. I would also say you might think about rephrasing that question instead of asking the minister her personal opinion about the matter.

**Ellen SANDELL:** Sure. On a point of order?

**The CHAIR:** Do you wish to raise a point of order?

**Ellen SANDELL:** Just to say that I feel like it is relevant because the minister has talked so much about providing opportunities for young people to be engaged in public life, so it directly goes to that. I will rephrase it.

**The CHAIR:** Rephrase it, please.

**Ellen SANDELL:** What is the government's policy on lowering the voting age to 16? That is for you, Minister.

**Natalie SULEYMAN:** Thank you for that question. What I can say is through the youth portfolio we provide a range of mechanisms for Victorian young people to share their ideas and shape laws, policies and programs, as I indicated through my presentation, and in 2018 the Victorian government established the Victorian Youth Congress, a group of young people from across the state who advise government on policy issues. At the moment they are looking into the renaming of the youth toolkit, and I know that they are working very hard and quite excited about this. In 2022 the Victorian –

**Ellen SANDELL:** Thanks, Minister. I might ask another question. Maybe they will rename themselves the You Should Vote council. Anyway, you talked a bit about the youth strategy, including in your presentation, but I could not see any specific funding in the budget for the youth strategy. Can you talk a bit about how it will be funded?

**Natalie SULEYMAN:** Sorry, is that on a reference page?

**Ellen SANDELL:** Referring to your presentation, you talked – I think it was the first slide – about developing the youth strategy, but I am asking if there is any specific funding to implement it.

**Natalie SULEYMAN:** Thank you for that question. As I indicated, *Our Promise, Your Future: Victoria's Youth Strategy 2022–2027* was launched in August of last year, and this was I think the step to provide a comprehensive plan to support young people to participate in economic, civic and political life in our state. To support the implementation of that strategy, the Victorian government invested \$5.3 million –



**The CHAIR:** Apologies, Ms Sandell. The time is up.

Minister and department officials, the time for questions has come to an end. 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 will be required within five working days of the committee's request.

I thank all ministers and officers who have given evidence to the committee today as well as Hansard, the committee secretariat and parliamentary attendants.

I also want to thank the hospitality, security and cleaning staff who have looked after all of us today.

The committee is going to resume its consideration of the 2023–24 budget estimates tomorrow on Thursday 15 June at 8:30 am.

I declare this hearing adjourned.

**Committee adjourned.**