

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Budget estimates 2020-21 (Foley)

Melbourne—Friday, 4 December 2020

MEMBERS

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Mr Richard Riordan—Deputy Chair

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WITNESSES

Mr Martin Foley, MP, Minister for Equality, and

Mr John Batho, Acting Deputy Secretary, Fairer Victoria, Department of Premier and Cabinet.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister, for joining us again, this time in your capacity as Minister for Equality. Again we invite you to make a 5-minute opening statement, and this will be followed by questions from the committee.

Mr FOLEY: Thank you, Chair. Could I introduce Mr John Batho from the Department of Premier and Cabinet, who appears sans his name tag. I understand the committee is familiar with Mr Batho from his previous appearance.

Visual presentation.

Mr FOLEY: It gives me great pleasure to jump into the equality portfolio's investment, which reflects our determination to ensure that LGBTIQ+ Victorian communities get the support they need particularly to recover from the impact the coronavirus has had on them. Whilst the pandemic has been challenging for all Victorians, it has particular implications and challenges for LGBTIQ+ people. For our rainbow community the pandemic has magnified challenges that they were already facing due to their marginalisation in many areas, discrimination and existing inequalities. Since April of this year we have funded some nine initiatives delivered by well-established and trusted LGBTIQ+ organisations to target the particular needs of these communities that have arisen over this time that were not being addressed elsewhere. Particularly we have seen emergency and financial assistance provided for both Thorne Harbour Health and Drummond Street Services as specialist and trusted community organisations to deliver that support. We have also had opportunities for social and community connection for communities that are already disproportionately isolated through JOY 94.9, who I note have rebranded as JOY Media, and the Celebrate Ageing group. I want to particularly acknowledge Dr Catherine Barrett and the Kindness Pandemic work, which not just went viral here in Victoria but went global, and the work of the Pride Cup in engaging in digital formats with the community to hold them together in this difficult time, as well as the counselling and support services, whether it be the Rainbow Door initiative of Switchboard Victoria or a range of other specialist organisations.

We have also included \$3 million in this budget to help address the ongoing challenges faced by our rainbow communities from the pandemic through those very programs as well as \$2 million to establish a new LGBTIQ+ sector economic recovery grants program. This program will deliver financial support to LGBTIQ+ organisations and businesses particularly affected by the pandemic, but it will also help shore up the sustainability and recovery of the sector, allowing it to provide the kind of support services that LGBTIQ+ Victorians are increasingly seeking as recovery gets underway. We have also invested \$1 million to continue the LGBTIQ+ community grants program, which supports organisational development and capacity building, which has been such an important feature of the equality portfolio over its period of time.

In both our last budget and this we have supported well-established organisations to run rainbow community activities during the pandemic. Our investment in the equality portfolio more broadly has now seen us, since 2015 and the creation of this portfolio, invest some \$50 million. This is including supporting the construction of the Victorian Pride Centre, the first purpose-built centre for LGBTIQ+ communities.

In terms of achieving the portfolio's goals into 2020 and beyond I would like to take a moment to just reflect on the important steps that have been made in the portfolio and across government over the course of this year. Along with the COVID-19 initiatives we have increased mental health support through the mental health portfolio and indeed other portfolios for LGBTIQ+ people, including through Switchboard Victoria and their groundbreaking Rainbow Door initiative. We have also implemented reforms which have made it easier for trans and gender-diverse people to change their sex registration on their birth certificate. We have also established a third LGBTIQ+ task force to provide support and advice to government on issues affecting these communities. Crucially we have also expanded our support for pride events particularly as we look to regional and rural communities to stand up and stand proud in more recent times. Of course all of those are in line with coronavirus restrictions.

In terms of our ongoing commitment to this portfolio, there is more to come in the years ahead. I particularly note that the Victorian Pride Centre is scheduled to open during the course of this budget provision—and there it is in downtown St Kilda.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. The time for the presentation has expired. We will hand to Ms Pauline Richards, MP.

Ms RICHARDS: Thank you, Minister. I have a terrific Casey Rainbow Network in my area. This time of the year it is great to thank people who have worked very hard to support people. The COVID-19 pandemic has had an impact on the way we all live our lives. Can you please explain how the government's response to the pandemic addresses the impacts of the pandemic on LGBTIQ+ Victorians, with a budget paper reference of BP3, page 318?

Mr FOLEY: Thank you, and can I acknowledge the support that so many members—but particularly you, Ms Richards—bring to our diverse LGBTIQ+ Victorians. There have been essentially nine dedicated programs that the portfolio has put together in response to the challenges of this year.

Through the 2019–20 LGBTIQ+ community grants program some \$595 000 was provided, with a further \$134 000 so far in the 2020–21 program around the combating homophobia budget to respond to those programs. That has been particularly the case, as I have highlighted, in rapid-response, community-supported and community-trusted organisations to deliver those services, whether it be Thorne Harbour Health, with their support for particularly the community that they have long held close to their heart, the HIV community, when it comes to the isolation, the special needs and indeed the rent and the food that members of that community particularly needed during COVID; or whether it be the work of Drummond Street Services and the important work that they have partnered on, for instance in the Barwon region, for particularly LGBTIQ+ young people, the work they do in the health arrangements and the disproportionate isolation that LGBTIQ+ communities have felt during the course of the pandemic as they have been following the social-distancing provisions.

So that investment, whilst it perhaps does not reach the scale of the health portfolio or indeed the Ambulance Victoria portfolio, in terms of its impacts for dollar and community receptiveness—they are investments that I am particularly pleased to see have had a significant impact in the targets that they have been a part of.

Ms RICHARDS: Thank you, Minister. So how did the government's response ensure that those vulnerable members of the LGBTIQ+ community received the support that they needed? And I am particularly interested in getting some insights into emergency assistance, like food, housing or even financial assistance—again referring to budget paper 3, page 318.

Mr FOLEY: Thank you, Ms Richards. As I touched on in my first answer, the issues around specialist services that the organisation now known as Thorne Harbour Health—in its earlier lives and now its much broader iteration it has for instance delivered two initiatives which have both expanded its volunteer network, to make sure that its staff can work with the increasing number of volunteers who have stepped forward during the pandemic to deal with emergency financial assistance to, particularly but not exclusively, Victorians coping with HIV, which of course has come so far in recent years. That has had particular impact when it comes to delivering support to over 120 vulnerable LGBTIQ+ Victorians to receive wellbeing support, specialist food support and arrangements that have seen—even though it is a small number—that disproportionate, enduring impact of a further additional 12 volunteers to that program, delivering those really important services.

Equally Switchboard Victoria, again a volunteer-based organisation, had been able to go from a location-specific digital and phone service to—under the work-from-home and decentralised social-distancing arrangements—a digital phone room that has completely reinvented the model of service but with the deep engagement that Switchboard has with LGBTIQ+ Victorians, and its phone-based relationship and support counselling as well as other forms of community engagement have seen some 5000 LGBTIQ+ Victorians engage with its services during that period of time.

And finally, Drummond Street Services' two initiatives around rental support and accommodation support have directly kept housed and engaged some 70 vulnerable LGBTIQ+ Victorians who are dealing with health and other issues associated with their status as LGBTIQ+ clients of Drummond Street Services—amongst others.

Ms RICHARDS: Thank you, Minister. So in addition to supporting frontline and emergency support services, how did the government's response ensure LGBTIQ+ Victorians who were experiencing increased isolation were able to stay connected to their communities?

Mr FOLEY: So for a community that is already dealing with marginalisation in so many ways, the pandemic has had a further impact on that isolation of LGBTIQ+ communities. So providing support to Joy FM and the multiple digital platforms it has established—particularly its wildly successful 1-hour online accessible variety show, the *Kerrie & Dolly* show, has been a spectacular success. And I see its last episode has just gone to air or is about to go to air. That has seen—whilst it might not be Netflix figures—3600 continued engagement views, which have been a really important part of staying connected for those LGBTIQ+ Victorians to feel that they are a part of a wider community and to have really practical supports and engagement strategies to sustain themselves through what has been a very tough 2020.

The Pride Cup, which is a network of sporting cups that celebrate diversity right across the state, clearly could not undertake those activities over the course of 2020. The support that they did to develop a virtual online hub to keep those Victorians, particularly in the regions, connected was quite successful. And, as I indicated earlier, the Celebrate Ageing social media campaign that Dr Catherine Barrett launched took well off, beyond not just the LGBTIQ+ Victorians—indeed it went global in terms of its impact. If I had to nominate any program that the Victorian government has invested in that had such a disproportionate positive benefit during the pandemic, it would be Dr Barrett's Kindness Pandemic. If you have not seen the Facebook page, if you have not seen the connections in real world right across neighbourhoods and communities from one end of the planet to the other, that is a site that I would strongly recommend that you look at. For the smell of an oily rag, its contribution has been spectacular.

Ms RICHARDS: That is terrific—so optimistic. In the short time I have got left, in the 2020–21 Victorian state budget there is \$2 million funding that is allocated for a new LGBTIQ+ sector recovery grants program. Can you explain what this will do?

Mr FOLEY: Yes, I can. This is a new initiative that has come out of consultations at the whole-of-government strategy conversations around making sure that LGBTIQ+ communities are supported in recovery. There are many businesses and organisations which provide a unique, safe and specialised service to LGBTIQ+ communities and which also employ LGBTIQ+ Victorians. And many of these have not been, for a variety of reasons—either the scale or engagement prospects—supported by other economic recovery aspects of the Victorian government's investments during the pandemic. The \$2 million outlined in the budget papers here will provide targeted funding for economic recovery and survival of LGBTIQ+ organisations and businesses that are at the heart of particular recovery strategies that we will start to see emerge as restrictions ease and as COVID-safe summer strategies allow re-engagement and re-emergence of both social and economic activities. The program intends to support a broad group of these organisations, and the grants, small as they are, are an important part of that recovery strategy.

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

Mr RIORDAN: Thanks, Chair. Thank you, Minister. I refer to the 'LGBTIQ+ equality policy and programs', a Department of Premier and Cabinet objective on page 318 of budget paper 3, which clearly shows a reduction in funding of 22.4 per cent from the 2019–20 budget and an actual 58.2 per cent from the 2019–20 actual of \$18.2 million. The notes on page 329, this year's budget paper 3, state:

The 2019–20 outcome was higher than the 2019–20 target primarily due to a Treasurer's Advance for the Victorian Pride Centre.

Mr FOLEY: Yes.

Mr RIORDAN: Minister, the Pride Centre is a very important initiative, and it is supported by all those in the Parliament. The original cost that was announced back, I think it was, in the 2015–16 budget—the original cost to government—was going to be \$10 million, and yet the centre appears to have cost the government in the vicinity of \$20 million. Will you explain why the costs blew out so badly and what errors in scoping or project costs contributed to this?

Mr FOLEY: Thank you, Mr Riordan. The Victorian Pride Centre is a significant and important initiative of this portfolio and will provide, as I communicated, a hub for many organisations and will be stronger than the

sum of its parts when it opens in early 2021. I dispute some of the—I think—assertions that you made. Whilst the Victorian government contributed an initial \$10 million to the project, and that was supplemented by a substantial in-kind contribution from the City of Port Phillip for the site itself—some \$12 million worth of value of the land, the proposition from the initiative of the Pride Centre, which is a community-driven initiative and governed by a not-for-profit, standalone volunteer board, was always to seek other partners, and there was a strong expectation, not unreasonable in the circumstances given the conversations that had happened with the commonwealth, that the commonwealth would contribute to that outcome. Despite numerous conversations with representatives of the commonwealth, that support from the commonwealth was not forthcoming, and in regard to the contribution that the project therefore needed from the state I was very pleased to advocate on behalf of the Pride Centre board and the wider LGBTIQ+ community to my cabinet colleagues and particularly the Treasurer as to how important this project was and how Victoria needed to ensure that the goals of the project were achieved—and that strategy was supported by the Treasurer. In addition we have also seen the fact that like many other building projects the impact of the pandemic and COVID social-distancing arrangements and other factors have further added to those costs, which you have rightly identified in the budget papers—

Mr RIORDAN: So Minister, can you separate that out? I mean, you made the announcement back in 2015–16 for the \$10 million. You have identified in great detail that you were unable to get extra sponsors for it, but you are now alluding very—without your usual detail and, sort of, expansion of knowledge on the issue, what was some of the poor planning or lack of scoping of the project?

Mr FOLEY: That is where I would take issue with you, Mr Riordan. The project has kept to scope and planning, with the exception of the restrictions from COVID that have slowed it down. The project has always been bold and significant in its design, in its delivery and in what it hopes, and it is well on the way to making sure of, more importantly, the outcomes that underlie the project itself. So I do not agree at all with the notion that the scope and the planning or indeed the delivery has been anything other than first class. And the work that the Pride Centre board in particular have undertaken has been exceptional. I am very proud that the Victorian government has been able to assist the Pride Centre board to make up for the shortfall, whether it be in philanthropic or the planned contribution that the commonwealth was expected to make that sadly did not occur.

Mr RIORDAN: So with the doubling of cost—I mean, we are not talking just a little blow-out of 10 per cent contingency here or there; we are saying it has gone from \$10 million to \$20 million—are you telling the committee that you are blaming that on COVID?

Mr FOLEY: No.

Mr RIORDAN: No. A lack of sponsors?

Mr FOLEY: As I indicated, there is a variety of factors that have contributed to the construction delays—

Mr RIORDAN: Would you agree it is a significant doubling of costs?

Mr FOLEY: What I dispute is your assertion that the project has doubled in cost. The Victorian contribution—

Mr RIORDAN: Well, I have got your document here. You said it was \$10 million.

Mr FOLEY: No, no. There is a difference between the agreed Victorian initial contribution and what the Pride Centre project always planned and envisaged the scope of the site and the cost of the site would be. In that regard I dispute fundamentally the notion that the project has doubled in cost. What the Victorian government has done is work in partnership with the Pride Centre board to address the shortfall in funding for what was always a significant project.

In addition to that, we have seen during the course of particularly 2020 the impact of the restrictions around social distancing and the time that that has impacted have further implications for some of the cost issues that the centre has dealt with. I was very pleased that the Victorian government was able to step forward and work with the Pride Centre board to address those to make sure that this important project could continue. So I reject the assertion that the costs have doubled. I think that is a misreading of the reality of both the Pride Centre's

business plan, the published public business plan and the structures that have occurred and the activities that have occurred to date.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. The member's time has expired. Mr Sam Hibbins.

Mr HIBBINS: Thank, Chair. Thank you, Minister and your team, for appearing before us this afternoon. In terms of your priorities for the upcoming year and the ban on conversion practices—that Bill which I think is being debated next week—is there any budget commitment to support that Bill in the upcoming budget? I mean, we have seen with other Bills often they come with a budget line item attached. Is any funding allocated to that particular Bill, whether that is support for survivors or support for enforcement or investigations or what have you?

Mr FOLEY: I am happy to answer that question, but I do so noting that the Bill that has been introduced to the Parliament is in fact an Attorney-General's Bill, not an equality portfolio Bill. But given that the equality portfolio has a decided whole-of-government focus, it is one that I have been particularly engaged with in both its development and its support and its input from victim-survivor communities as well as a whole range of faith and other cultural communities.

What it does is deliver on the election commitment that we made that arose out of work that the health complaints commissioner did put in place. What we will do is—in addition to the funding that is set out in this budget line that the committee has before it today, as part of the combating homophobia and some of the other program lines in there, there will be, I can advise the committee, a further \$250 000 to develop resources and guidelines to support victim-survivors and in so doing bring greater awareness to the harm these practices cause. That is for this portfolio, but given both the educative and the ongoing work, should the Bill pass, that will have a greater role for the Victorian human rights and equal opportunity commission. I would expect that of course the Attorney-General in her portfolio would look to how this important work of that group can be further supported through that portfolio.

Mr HIBBINS: Good. Well, you have answered my second question. I will move on to another area that I think we have covered off in previous estimates committees, and that is that we are still awaiting the federal government's inquiry into how they can protect LGBTI students at faith-based schools from discrimination. Now, the last place we left it, you were waiting on an inquiry from the Law Reform Commission federally and the government's commitment was to fill any gaps if that legislation was then introduced and passed in the federal Parliament. Can you give the committee an update in terms of the status of those reforms?

Mr FOLEY: Yes and no: yes, in so far as that is exactly the position that the Victorian government hopes to be able to deliver on; no, in terms of we have seen no movement whatsoever from the commonwealth, and I see no evidence that the commonwealth's activities in how to deliver on its commitment about addressing this provision will be dealt with. Indeed I see no reference to any agency at the commonwealth level, and I see no timetable for it to be dealt with. My appreciation of the issue, having engaged with the commonwealth Attorney-General on this matter, is that the commonwealth hope this issue goes away through benign inaction.

In terms of what the Victorian government's response needs to be to fill what is more than a gap—a gaping chasm would be a more significant issue there—that is dealt with in part by a much wider strategy that the Victorian government is engaging with through our LGBTIQ+ community and the formal mechanisms that we have in place with the community to address a range of issues. We committed at the last election—of which the undertaking that you just touched on was a part—to developing a whole-of-government, whole-of-community strategy around dealing with discrimination and isolation and disadvantage that LGBTIQ+ Victorians suffer. That is well underway and—if I could just very quickly finish—has seen on the Engage Victoria website an enormous amount of work that that group has done. We have further expectations that engagement with community and the launch of those discussion issues around what community are seeking will be finalised literally in coming weeks in terms of a draft position, and then we will further consult with community and other stakeholders about implementing that strategy.

Mr HIBBINS: Right. Thanks, Minister.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Hibbins. Thank you, Minister. That concludes our time with you this morning in discussion regarding the budget estimates hearings.

We thank you very much and all of your officials for appearing before the committee today with you in those capacities. The committee will follow up on any questions taken on notice in writing, and responses will be required within 10 working days of the committee's request.

The committee will be adjourned in its capacity considering the budget estimates. We will resume with you at 2.00 pm for consideration in relation to this committee's inquiry into the government's response to the COVID pandemic. We will meet with you again then, Minister. Thank you for your time.

Committee adjourned.