

# **PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE**

## **Budget estimates 2020-21 (Leane)**

Melbourne—Friday, 18 December 2020

### **MEMBERS**

Ms Lizzie Blandthorn—Chair

Mr Richard Riordan—Deputy Chair

Mr Sam Hibbins

Mr David Limbrick

Mr Gary Maas

Mr Danny O'Brien

Ms Pauline Richards

Mr Tim Richardson

Ms Nina Taylor

Ms Bridget Vallenge



## WITNESSES

Mr Shaun Leane, MLC, Minister for Veterans,

Ms Louise Perry, Executive Director, Fairer Victoria, and

Ms Angela Bourke, Director, Veterans Branch, Department of Premier and Cabinet.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you again, Minister Leane, for joining with us today, this time for consideration of the veterans portfolio. We again invite you to make a 5-minute presentation, and this will be followed by questions from the committee. Thank you.

### Visual presentation.

**Mr LEANE:** Thank you, Chair. I am really pleased for the opportunity to update the committee on the veterans portfolio 2020–21 Victorian budget and the key achievements from 2019–20 as well. The government supports Victorian veterans' wellbeing and recognition and acknowledgement of their service through initiatives to support their successful transition to and participation in civilian life. This includes support for veterans employment initiatives, veterans grants programs, delivery of commemoration, education and heritage initiatives, supports to the Shrine of Remembrance and the Victorian Veterans Council and engagement with the commonwealth government to ensure veterans receive the support that they need.

In 2020–21 the government is committed to \$4.9 million over four years to support Victorian veterans. This year's budget outlines initiatives including \$2.25 million over two years to extend the veterans capital works program to upgrade facilities belonging to ex-service organisations for welfare purposes, commemorations and other community uses; almost \$1.3 million over three years to develop accommodation options for veterans with complex needs; \$594 000 over two years to continue to deliver the public sector veteran employment strategy, including extension of the veterans mentor program and veterans employee network, delivery of information sessions and workshops; a further \$200 000 over two years to RSL Active, which supports veterans' wellbeing and combats social isolation; and \$360 000 over three years to deliver the government's commitment to give every government secondary school the opportunity to host a Vietnam veteran guest speaker and learn from their experience firsthand. This is an increase of \$1.3 million on last year's budget in the veterans portfolio.

If I can speak about some of the programs, the public sector veteran employment strategy is on track to meet its target to employ 750 veterans in the Victorian public sector by June 2021. We have exceeded our target for 2019–20, and to date there are 618 veterans that are in place and employed in public sector roles. In 2019–20 we provided a quarter of a million dollars to support Vietnam veterans welfare initiatives as part of the \$1 million commitment to the Vietnam Veterans Association.

The expansion of Phoenix Australia's Centenary of Anzac Centre commenced. This has been made possible through the government's \$1.5 million commitment. We presented veterans welfare information sessions in metropolitan and regional locations to provide ex-service organisations with information about Victorian government welfare programs and services.

In 2019–20 the veterans grants program provided \$2.3 million to 150 projects for welfare, commemoration, education, capital works projects and war memorial restorations. In response to COVID-19 we allocated \$2.2 million to ensure veterans received vital support, and we allocated \$100 000 to help RSL Victoria establish Veteran Central, VetCen, a call centre to connect veterans to services. I am pleased to say that the 2019–20 BP3 measures have all been met or exceeded.

There was a key focus around the 75th anniversary of the end of the Second World War in the Pacific. While many commemorative services could not occur in 2020 as they had before, as a result of the global pandemic, the shrine, RSL Victoria and other ex-service organisations successfully engaged with thousands of people in Victoria through virtual services, and of course Anzac Day and Remembrance Day were in a similar situation. I really want to thank the shrine for their efforts, and I know they appreciated the funding we gave them to be able to increase the cameras for when they did live stream these particular really important commemorative services. And I have got to say they did a great job of it.

I would like to speak briefly on the Victorian Veterans Employment and Skills Accreditation Roundtable. Veterans have exceptional skills which actually we want in Victoria. They are an absolute asset. Some veterans have skills that are not recognised—

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Minister, and I will pass the call to Mr Tim Richardson, MP.

**Mr RICHARDSON:** Thank you, Minister, for joining us this afternoon to talk about the very important portfolio of veterans. First of all, the acknowledgement of Anzac Day and the ‘stand to’ campaign was fitting across Victoria under difficult circumstances, and then the support for veterans throughout this year—the acknowledgement of World War II, the 75th anniversary, and also Remembrance Day was outstanding and really a credit to your team and your leadership there.

Minister, I want to take you budget paper 3, page 318. Just for the committee’s benefit, I will refer you to that. How does the budget support Victorian veterans?

**Mr LEANE:** Thank you, Mr Richardson. As I stated in my presentation the budget delivers an increase of \$1.3 million on last year’s budget for the veterans portfolio, and we have continued to increase important initiatives such as \$2.25 million over two years to extend the of which are used to extend veterans capital works programs to upgrade facilities belonging to ex-service organisations for welfare purposes, commemorative purposes and other community uses; and \$1.29 million over three years to develop accommodation options for veterans with complex needs.

Can I say that is an amount of money that we are really delighted that we can work in with Minister Wynne’s \$5.4 billion announcement around housing. I had a really good conversation with Minister Wynne and Homes Victoria around ensuring that veterans are well and truly encompassed in the narrative around that housing. There are some great organisations that do specialise in veterans housing and crisis accommodation, and so I have ensured that Homes Victoria, who have I have met myself, will be in contact with those organisations about the potential possibilities of more housing and more crisis accommodation that those particular great organisations provide.

I have got to say, Mr Richardson, they are very, very keen to be part of the program, and I think that it is a great opportunity for us to ensure that veterans are looked after in this particular way. There is also \$594 000 over two years to continue to deliver the Public Sector Veterans Employment Strategy. And as I said, that includes an extension of the mentor program. Major General David McLachlan has led this program for a while now.

This is a great program where—and I think I said in the last slide—ex-service men and women have obtained great skills, amazing skills, in their time in the defence forces, and we have really tapped into that as far as the public service. And as I said, the major general has done a great job in spearheading that. I had a chat to him on the phone yesterday, and he has further ambitions for our next budget. But we will talk about that at the next PAEC, hopefully, about how we can increase the role and how we can increase the uptake in that particular area. Those sorts of discussions and other discussions with the veterans community have led me to form the group the Victorians Veterans Employment and Skills Accreditation Roundtable. It is chaired by Jo Moloney, who is the CEO of Legacy Victoria and who has a great background. She was actually a director of Box Hill TAFE before she took up this role, so she spans the two sides of maybe the skills gap but also an understanding of the veterans community.

The more and more I meet people, Mr Richardson, that used to be vets or are family members of vets, the more I learn that we really do not understand, in the private and public sector, the assets that these people are. I had a conversation with one particular gentleman who was an expert in water—you know, where it flowed, how it reacted—because of course defence forces can set up a town in 60 days, a large town in 60 days, so you need to understand all these aspects. I had a conversation with him, and his title was Warrant Officer Class Two or something. When he goes to our water companies, our water agencies, looking for a job, they do not really understand that title and what it means compared to if he actually turned up at those agencies—they would snap him up—and he had the relative title that we know and understand. So I have asked this roundtable to do work on identifying those sorts of activities or occupations and disciplines in the forces and equating them to what we understand in the private and public sector. And then if there is any sort of training gap, the skills people on the roundtable will work out what needs to be done—as in what part of a course—to be able to obtain that title to actually operate in the public and private sector.

Our government's goal is that, in doing work like this, we want to be the destination state for people—men and women—leaving the services, because we want them. We need them. As you rightly know, we have a very ambitious program and we are putting a lot of investment into a lot of programs and a lot of infrastructure. We have tasked this roundtable with this role. I am actually quite excited about what we might be able to do. We have made sure that there are employer associations on the roundtable. They have met once, and already the employer associations have gone off and are quite excited to think what they can do to get these assets to Victoria. So this is a program I have got to say previous vet ministers should be really proud of. I think it started with John Eren, and Minister Scott followed it on. I am really keen to evolve it and increase their good work.

I mentioned before the \$200 000 over two years for RSL Active, which has been a highly successful program. I did mention in the presentation that during COVID we were approached by RSL Victoria about isolation for vets. We assisted them with \$100 000 for a program that we help them fund, called VetCen. This is a hotline where veterans that felt a bit isolated, particularly in recent months, could ring this particular number and they could be advised or directed to different services that they may need—or just have a conversation, which, as we know, has been important. I think the \$100 000 paid for itself with one instance I was told about. A young man who had spent 10 years in his mum and dad's house after returning from tour of duty isolated himself from the world, could not bring himself to go out of the house, and for some reason this number was available. I know other services have been available. For some reason he actually rang this number, and after ringing this number he got reconnected to society through, as I said, being directed to a lot of different services by the great work of the RSL and Legacy, who do this together.

I suppose I am going off on a bit of a tangent, Mr Richardson, but it is an absolute privilege for me to be the Minister for Veterans and work with these groups and work with veterans and listen to them, ask them what they want. And I have got to say what I have found Victorians want is they just want us to acknowledge their great skills and make sure they get a go. They are not asking for a favour, just to make sure they get a go.

I will leave that there, Mr Richardson. Thank you for your question.

**Mr RICHARDSON:** We have seen that on the Mordialloc Freeway project, with Veterans in Construction. It has been an incredibly important and successful project. I might just come back, in the last few seconds that I have got, to housing, Minister, and talk very positively about the big building agenda in housing. But the budget also allocates funding to address veterans' housing needs. I wonder if you could elaborate a bit further on that?

**Mr LEANE:** Yes. Obviously we will develop a veterans accommodation plan and develop an implementation plan of a business case and provisions to support existing and evidenced-based veterans sector accommodation initiatives. We have decided that we can really get a lot of bang out of this dollar by working in with HousingVic. We have had some really great initial conversations, and of course Minister Wynne is right behind it.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Minister.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Minister, if I could also refer to budget paper 3, page 318, and the outputs for this year. The allocation this year is \$9 million versus an actual last year of \$9.6 million. What is the reason for a \$600 000 cut in the budget in what is a pretty modest budget to start with?

**Mr LEANE:** Those figures might be deceiving because, as you know, we had a budget in June.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Well, no. We did not have a budget in June.

**Mr LEANE:** Before that—let me finish—we actually had an issue with the global pandemic, and we got calls for support from different groups. We allocated \$1.5 million to the RSL as part of their Anzac Day appeal.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** When was that?

**Mr LEANE:** Anzac Day time, which is in April. We also allocated \$500 000 on my understanding—well, it is not my understanding; I know. We allocated some money to Legacy, because they could not run the appeal as they usually do at the time that they needed their fundraising. I spoke about the \$100 000 for VetCen.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Sorry, when you say that are you talking about RSL Active? It is listed in the budget papers as 'RSL Active'.

**Mr LEANE:** No. There is a program, VetCen, which I said was the hotline, which we gave \$100 000 for them to be able to establish that.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** I am looking at page 123, 'RSL Active program, which aims to reduce instances of social isolation'. Is that the same thing?

**Mr LEANE:** There are actually a number of programs around isolation. And it is not a new thing just because of COVID. This was an approach to us as far as VetCen—

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** What is it called, sorry?

**Mr LEANE:** VetCen, which is short for 'vet centre', which is run by the hub, which is a hub that has newly been created between the RSL and Legacy. And they have located themselves at Anzac House.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Okay.

**Mr LEANE:** Look, I think in fairness, Mr O'Brien, I might hand you over to the Director to give you a comprehensive response on why—

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** No, that is okay, Minister, because that does answer the question. So \$1.5 million to the RSL and half a million to Legacy effectively accounts for the increase on last year's budgeted figure, and then there will be a reduction this year as a result of that increase. Okay.

**Mr LEANE:** And can I apologise, Mr O'Brien, there was \$100 000 for RSL Active as well as VetCen.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Okay. Can I move on to the RSL specifically. You would be aware that there have been reports and the RSL has been quite open that they are in a bit of strife financially, and no doubt COVID and the ability to raise funds is going to impact that further. They have said publicly that they are seeking more money from you. Will you be supporting the RSL to ensure that it does remain financially viable?

**Mr LEANE:** Mr O'Brien, I will get to the support, but I actually immediately reached out to the RSL's CEO when I saw those media reports about the RSL's viability and their ability to deliver the wellness programs that they actually do a great job in delivering. Before I could meet him, I noticed the next day after those reports he actually put out a communication to all the RSL branches that he was a little bit grumpy that some of that was getting taken out of context, and he told the branches to not be concerned about the financial viability—

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Sorry, who was that? The CEO or the president?

**Mr LEANE:** The CEO.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** The CEO, yes.

**Mr LEANE:** So we had a conversation around that. I took into account that there may have been some mischievousness around what he was trying to say, and he guaranteed that for those programs that are important to his members there is no threat to those being able to be delivered. You know, there is always a bit of talk about whether or not RSL Victoria should be involved in gaming or whether RSLs should be doing this or RSLs should be doing that. I am not too sure whether you feel the same way, Mr O'Brien, but members of the RSL would not appreciate a minister of the Victorian government embedding themselves into their commercial arrangements or their administration arrangements, but what we agreed to—

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** No. I guess probably the bottom line though, Minister, and what we want to know is: will you guarantee the future operations of the RSL, using Victorian taxpayer resources if necessary?

**Mr LEANE:** What I committed to the CEO is that we keep working together on the really good programs that we have worked together on in recent times. As I said, there are probably ministers and different flavours

of government that have done a lot of good work with RSL Victoria and different branches. I think it is not for me to make commentary around their commercial arrangements. But what I will say—

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Sorry, Minister. Is there a formal request?

**Mr LEANE:** and the question I did ask was: has the CEO spoken to the federal government? Because ultimate responsibility for veterans welfare is with the federal government, and I think it gets lost.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Minister, I am running out of time.

**Mr LEANE:** I felt a bit sorry for the RSL in that they were getting people actually pointing out that they might not be doing enough for veterans welfare, when it is actually the federal government's responsibility.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Minister, can I just ask the bottom-line question: has Victorian RSL put a request to you for further funding?

**Mr LEANE:** I had a conversation with the CEO directly, and this is the way that I try and—

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** You told us that, Minister. I am running out of time. I just want to know whether they have put a request in or not. Yes or no?

**Mr LEANE:** Well, not to me, but I did reach out. I reached out to the CEO, which I see as my role, and actually we got to a point of complete agreement around how we should work together in the future.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** And does that require more money from the state government?

**The CHAIR:** Mr O'Brien, Mr Hibbins has the call.

**Mr LEANE:** I reckon it requires money from the level of government that has the responsibility for veterans welfare—

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Minister.

*Members interjecting.*

**Mr LEANE:** I think we could join each other—

**The CHAIR:** Minister, sorry to interrupt you.

*Members interjecting.*

**Mr LEANE:** I would invite you to join me in actually advocating for a system that actually looks after veterans welfare, not a system that spends more money on stopping veterans and their families getting welfare, where a veteran has to go up against teams of lawyers just to get help.

**The CHAIR:** Minister, sorry. Minister, can I call you to order, please. Mr O'Brien, you no longer have the call. Mr Hibbins has the call.

**Mr HIBBINS:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Minister and team, for appearing this afternoon. I will ask you to continue. I think you were heading down a thread there in relation to RSLs and pokies that I would like you to expand on now. We have got a terrific RSL down in Prahran—fantastic people there—and we do not have pokies in our RSL, but many do. I appreciate you saying you do not want to run commentary on commercial arrangements of RSLs, but, you know, there is a social aspect to this. Are you concerned that your funding to support veterans is undermined by the fact that RSLs are operating pokies?

**Mr LEANE:** Mr Hibbins, I am not concerned about the funding that the Victorian government puts towards welfare, because they are actually targeted programs. So I think that—getting back to the answer to Mr O'Brien—you know, it is not for me to immerse myself in the commercial dealings of different RSLs. I do agree that all RSLs do their best and do a great job in what their goals are as well, and their goals are for comradeship and also to look out for each other at the best of times and worst of times. So I am not concerned

about the funding programs that we have as far as that they are not going to the welfare that we actually agree with the RSL and all ex-service organisations.

There are a number of ex-service organisations, not just the RSL, that do some fantastic work, and I have had a lot of conversations with a lot of them. Mr Hibbins, I kind of do not understand why they have to do this heavy lifting when it comes to welfare. I just cannot get my head around and could not get my head around why somebody would be critical of any ex-service organisation and the work they are doing in welfare, because there has been a federal system that even the federal Productivity Commission said is not fit for purpose. It is broken. I am not being political, because it has been broken for 100 years—it does not matter what flavour of government there has been in the federal realm.

A number of veterans and their families that I have spoken to believe that more money gets spent on stopping them getting welfare than would be if they were given welfare. I have got to say, Mr Hibbins, I spoke to a young widow whose husband on a tour of duty—overseas obviously—was in an area where the radiation was that high that his comrades all gave an affidavit that their torches turned on without them switching them on. He returned from that deployment and passed away with a brain tumour two months later. Two months later his first daughter was born, and I spoke to his widow and she says she feels like her soul has been ripped out for three years trying to get help from the federal Department of Veterans' Affairs. Anyway, I am sorry if I diverge.

**Mr HIBBINS:** No, that is okay. They are important stories to share. But just returning back to the question: again, you are saying you are not wanting to run commentary, but it must be something that concerns you or is on your agenda—the fact that, number one, RSLs are under financial pressure; they are not getting the revenue from the pokies that they once had and, two, there are a number of veterans and a push within the RSL for them to actually move out of pokies. Surely this must be something—either further support for RSLs or support for RSLs to get out of pokies—that must be on your radar.

**Mr LEANE:** I have got to say, Mr Hibbins, I think it would be very unfair. As I have said, there are a number of ex-service organisations, and they have different commercial arrangements. I think it would be unfair for me to even, as I said before, put my nose into their commercial arrangements. I understand that people have different opinions about different ex-service organisations' commercial arrangements, and I think that is a matter for those particular members of those particular organisations.

**Mr HIBBINS:** Thanks, Minister. Thanks, Chair.

**The CHAIR:** Perfectly timed, thank you. That concludes the time we have set aside for consideration of your estimates, Minister Leane. Thank you to you and all of your officials for appearing before our committee today. 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 now take a short break before moving to consideration of estimates with Minister Wynne. We thank you for your time today.

**Mr LEANE:** Thank you. Have a good break, everyone.

**The CHAIR:** You too, Minister.

**Witnesses withdrew.**