

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

2021–22 Budget Estimates

Melbourne—Wednesday, 16 June 2021

MEMBERS

Ms Lizzie Blandthorn—Chair

Mr Richard Riordan—Deputy Chair

Mr Sam Hibbins

Mr David Limbrick

Mr Gary Maas

Mr James Newbury

Mr Danny O’Brien

Ms Pauline Richards

Mr Tim Richardson

Ms Nina Taylor

WITNESSES

Ms Ros Spence, MP, Minister for Multicultural Affairs,

Ms Brigid Monagle, Deputy Secretary, Fairer Victoria,

Ms Nicola Young, Executive Director, Multicultural Affairs, Equality and Office for Youth, and

Ms Jessie Mitchell, Director, Multicultural Affairs, Equality and Office for Youth, Department of Families, Fairness and Housing.

The CHAIR: I declare open this hearing of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee.

On behalf of the Parliament, the committee is conducting this Inquiry into the 2021–22 Budget Estimates. Its aim is to scrutinise public administration and finance to improve outcomes for the Victorian community.

Please note that witnesses and members may remove their masks when speaking to the committee but must replace them afterwards. Mobile telephones and computers should be turned to silent.

All evidence taken by this committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. Comments repeated outside this hearing may not be protected by this privilege.

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 as soon as possible.

We welcome Minister Spence in the first instance in her capacity as Minister for Multicultural Affairs. We invite you to make a brief opening statement of no more than 5 minutes, which will be followed by questions from the committee. Thank you.

Ms SPENCE: Thank you, Chair. Before I begin, I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we are meeting today and pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging.

Visual presentation.

Ms SPENCE: I am very pleased to be here today to provide the committee with an overview of the multicultural affairs portfolio, including 2020–21 highlights and the 2021–22 budget investments. As we know, Victoria is proudly one of the most diverse multicultural societies in the world, and I am proud to work in partnership with Victoria's multicultural communities and community organisations to strengthen services, access and social and economic opportunities for all multicultural Victorians.

There was an unprecedented investment of \$105.4 million in the multicultural affairs portfolio in 2020–21. Of this, \$44.1 million supported our direct response to the coronavirus pandemic to address the impacts on multicultural communities. The pandemic has been disproportionately hard on multicultural communities, and this investment was an essential part of the Victorian government's broader coronavirus response. In 2021–22 investment will continue to reflect the importance of the portfolio, with \$66.8 million committed in 2021–22, up from \$21.8 million when we came to government in 2014–15. This includes \$12.1 million to expand and extend the work of the CALD communities task force until June 2022.

Over the past year the multicultural affairs portfolio has worked actively with our multicultural communities to deliver a range of tailored supports which directly address the impacts of the pandemic. Our largest investments included establishing and supporting the CALD communities task force through an investment of \$33.13 million to coordinate communications, translations, engagement and funding projects across government and communities; over 200 partnerships with community organisations have supported more than 70 000 individuals and 9000 households; and \$34.3 million to support economic recovery and job creation, including supporting upgrades to nearly 100 community facilities to provide community and faith groups with a place to celebrate, preserve and share their traditions.

In addition to the coronavirus response, the multicultural affairs portfolio has continued to support Victoria's diverse communities through a range of targeted initiatives, including working in partnership with Victoria's

African communities by providing a further \$4.5 million for ongoing implementation of the *Victorian African Communities Action Plan*; continuing to step in to support refugees and people seeking asylum by providing \$2.2 million for strengthened services and infrastructure, including legal advice and connections to health, education, employment and welfare services; and combating racism and discrimination through a concerted statewide approach by providing \$3.9 million for a range of measures, which includes backing 42 grassroots organisations to drive local, community-led initiatives to tackle racism through the local anti-racism initiatives grants program and the establishment of an anti-racism strategy, which will develop the whole-of-government anti-racism strategy.

In 2021–22 funding from the multicultural affairs portfolio will ensure that multicultural communities are supported as our state recovers from the pandemic. This includes \$23.7 million for new initiatives in the multicultural affairs portfolio: \$8.7 million is committed to continue critical supports for Victoria's humanitarian cohorts and emerging communities; a further \$8 million over four years will provide certainty of support for more than 900 multicultural seniors groups; \$4.5 million is committed to initiatives to support the continuation of the Multicultural Community Infrastructure Fund; and we will continue to take a stand against all forms of discrimination and prejudice, including through \$1.5 million to progress the work of the government's response to the parliamentary inquiry into anti-vilification protections. We are also investing \$1.1 million for multicultural festivals and events and as well as this the announcement this month of a further \$12.1 million to continue work of the CALD communities task force. So this government will continue to invest in our people, in our communities, as we tackle recovery from the pandemic together.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, and I will pass to Ms Richards in the first instance. Thank you.

Ms RICHARDS: Thank you, Minister, and thank you to the officials as well for appearing this afternoon and all the heavy lifting that you have been doing lately. In the presentation, and I know as well in budget paper 3, page 47, it is important that multicultural or community organisations do have suitable facilities to ensure that they can continue to preserve and share their traditions. So using that item on budget paper 3, can you outline how the investment will support members of Victoria's culturally and linguistically diverse communities?

Ms SPENCE: Thank you, and thank you for the question and for your interest in this area. What we do know is that culturally and linguistically diverse communities often do face barriers in their day-to-day lives, including access to employment, traditional social support structures and mainstream services such as health and education support, and for these groups having access to those dedicated facilities where they can come together is so, so very important. So the 2021–22 Victorian budget commits \$4.3 million for infrastructure grants to build, upgrade and renovate multicultural community facilities across the state, and this investment is expected to support an additional 20 new projects. It builds on the \$21 million that the government invested to upgrade multicultural community facilities as part of the economic recovery support for the Victorian multicultural communities and young people initiative that was in 2020–21 Victorian budget, and that investment is already supporting almost 100 different multicultural community facilities to be built and upgraded. Examples of the types of projects that this funding could support include the construction of a new community centre to gather in, the upgrade of existing facilities such as halls or kitchens to better allow organisations to host events with their communities or creating dedicated meeting rooms to allow discussions or training or development to take place. It will support that social cohesion and allow multicultural communities to celebrate and to preserve their traditions, and it will also allow for those traditions to be shared with the broader Victorian community, which we also know is so very important.

Ms RICHARDS: Thanks so much, Minister. So you just talked then about the investment of \$4.3 million, and I am conscious that will be timely and especially beneficial for the communities in my electorate, pardon my parochialism. For the convenience of the committee members can you elaborate on how and when this funding can be accessed?

Ms SPENCE: Happy to. Yes, it will be very important to groups within your electorate, and having visited some of those groups I know that they will be very, very happy about this funding. Funding will be delivered through the 2021–22 Multicultural Community Infrastructure Fund competitive grant round, and I anticipate that applications for this will open in around September of this year. All details, including the program, guidelines, time frames and contact details, will be available on the Victorian government website. Applications will be assessed against the criteria that will be outlined within those guidelines and announced later in 2021,

with projects expected to be completing their activities by 30 June 2022. So multicultural community organisations will be encouraged to apply, and we anticipate strong demand for coinvestment from Victorian CALD communities. Historically, since 2016 the multicultural affairs portfolio has received over 450 applications seeking more than \$73 million to support community infrastructure projects, so we know that these are incredibly highly demanded grant applications. The investment directly responds to this need and to this demand, and it will enable many communities to deliver projects that they would not have been able to do otherwise.

We know from our previous investments what a difference this funding makes for multicultural communities. And as one example, recently we announced \$500 000 in funding to the Islamic Society of Victoria to upgrade and renovate the Preston mosque. Now, the Preston mosque was originally constructed in 1976, and over the years it has become a real hub for the local Muslim community to gather. But like so much of our local community infrastructure, it has become no longer fit for purpose, and it was requiring not only that maintenance but also being brought up to a different use, because the type of use of these facilities changes over time. So the investment by the government will support not only the upgrades to the mosque, including the construction of a new multipurpose space and learning facilities and offices, but it will also assist the local community to have a space where they can come together to celebrate and to share the many Islamic traditions. And it will change the nature of that space to something that is more akin to what the current use of that space is.

Now, having visited the Preston mosque, I can speak firsthand to the difference that that particular investment will make. Speaking to the organisers of that investment, I know how particularly keen they are for this to take place. They have been planning these works for a very long time and they are very incredibly keen, so I know that this will go a really long way not only for those that are participating in activities now but to also draw in others that may not have been accessing the space because it was no longer fit for the purpose.

Ms RICHARDS: Thanks, Minister. And of course as the most successful multicultural state in Australia, we have got more Victorians from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds living in regional Victoria, and job opportunities and the special commonwealth government visa categories have encouraged that, so we are seeing the need for more community assets and spaces. Can you please outline what your portfolio and department are doing to increase multicultural portfolio investment in rural and regional Victoria?

Ms SPENCE: Absolutely. And the government really is committed to supporting culturally and linguistically diverse communities in rural and regional Victoria, and we recognise that many of these multicultural organisations may have access to limited resources or opportunities. So support for investment in facilities in rural and regional Victoria is provided in two ways. Firstly, rural and regional applicants have lower matched funding requirements, making it easier for them to apply. So projects in rural and regional Victoria, or new and emerging communities as well, only need to provide \$1 for every \$3 of Victorian government funding, so it is a lower matched funding requirement. That is the first.

Secondly, rural and regional applicants are also prioritised through the assessment process to reflect the priority in supporting them. Since 2018 more than \$4 million in infrastructure grants has been allocated to 40 projects in rural Victoria. For example, the Macedonian Orthodox Community of Geelong Victoria Incorporated received \$270 000 to support construction of a multipurpose facility. The organisation reported that the new facility felt like a home base for the community, and we know that that is so incredibly important. The multipurpose space is used for a range of purposes, a range of programs and activities, including Macedonian dancing, fitness classes, social events and cultural celebrations. We know that they become a real hub for the whole community to come together, and it also shares that culture with the broader community—incredibly important.

I am really proud of our government's support for multicultural communities, and the Multicultural Community Infrastructure Fund is a really key pillar for that support. It is important for the communities that access that fund, it is important that we get these programs up in our local community and we provide these bases, these homes, for communities within and across the state, but it is also important for the broader community to have access to multicultural spaces as well.

Ms RICHARDS: Thanks so much, Minister. Fascinating.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, Ms Richards. I will pass the call to Mr Newbury.

Mr NEWBURY: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Minister. If I can refer you to budget paper 3, page 201 and also your presentation earlier, there has been a clear reduction in your portfolio's allocation spend for the 2020–21 and 2021–22 years—a 50 per cent reduction. Why is there a 50 per cent reduction?

Ms SPENCE: The reduction in the expenditure from last year to this year is predominantly as a result of the increased expenditure last year in response to the COVID response funding. This year we have had the additional \$12.1 million of COVID, but there was the massive boost as a result of COVID in the last year's funding.

Mr NEWBURY: Noting that we are in the middle of a lockdown, I would not suggest that situation has changed, and we heard earlier this morning that the current lockdown is not dissimilar to last year. So why has there been an allocation difference, noting that?

Ms SPENCE: The majority of the funding that was COVID funding in last year's budget that you are seeing now was not allocated through the budget; it was out-of-budget allocations, as the \$12.1 million that you are seeing now was an out-of-budget allocation. So I am not suggesting to you that when we look at the end-of-year figure—that may not be the only figure. We have responded as the need has demanded, and we responded throughout COVID and provided those additional supports, just as we provided only recently the \$12.1 million out of budget to support in this current lockdown.

Mr NEWBURY: I take that on board. In relation to the machinery-of-government change that moved multicultural affairs out of the Department of Premier and Cabinet, why was that the case?

Ms SPENCE: I will defer to Brigid Monagle to respond to that.

Mr NEWBURY: Sure.

Ms MONAGLE: Thank you, Mr Newbury. Can I clarify the question. You are asking the rationale for why the move happened?

Mr NEWBURY: Yes.

Ms MONAGLE: Yes, absolutely. So you would note that as part of the machinery-of-government change quite a number of portfolios moved out of the Department of Premier and Cabinet into the newly created Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, and in addition to multicultural affairs it included women, veterans, the LGBTI community portfolio called 'equality', and youth as well. What that was recognising, Mr Newbury, was the distinct functional alignment between those portfolios and the newly created portfolios that were combined in the new DFFH department.

Mr NEWBURY: Yes. Further to this discussion—and I do not want to speak for them, but I can certainly say—former premiers Kennett, Baillieu and Napthine were of the view that having the portfolio in the central agency sent an important signal to the community; it also made sure that they were personally aware of issues in a closer sense. What would you say to the suggestion that it sends a signal to the community that multicultural affairs has been downgraded?

Ms MONAGLE: I would have to say that is not something I have heard from the community, and we obviously talk with them a lot. I think that they really appreciate being part of a department where they have a lot of contact across the department already, have centralised COVID and communications support and keep in touch with all the other population portfolios that go with it as well. There are a lot of lessons that they learn from each other and there is a lot of support. Also, it combines all the commissioners for all those portfolios in one department as well, and that is proving really a great way of supporting them across the department.

Mr NEWBURY: Just to end on that, there was a budget cut and a downgrading of the department.

The CHAIR: Sorry, Mr Newbury. Was that a question that you would like answered—

Mr NEWBURY: No. I made a statement.

The CHAIR: or is that just your proposition?

Mr NEWBURY: Thank you, Labor Chair.

The CHAIR: Well, Mr Newbury, as you know, it is not an opportunity to make statements. It is an opportunity to ask questions of the witnesses.

Mr NEWBURY: Or for chairs to add political commentary.

The CHAIR: When members of the committee are out of order, I will call it out of order, Mr Newbury. If you have a question, you put it to the witnesses. It is not a time for making statements.

Mr NEWBURY: Indeed. Thank you, Labor Chair. Minister, is any funding in the current budget allocated to Trades Hall?

Ms SPENCE: No.

Mr NEWBURY: What about the Migrant Workers Centre?

Ms SPENCE: In regard to the Migrant Workers Centre, there is funding that will come out of the budget for the Migrant Workers Centre. However, that will not happen until certain steps have taken place. Now, you would be aware obviously of the VAGO report and the recommendations that were made as a result of that report. Now, following that, there were some additional steps that I asked to be put in place. One was that the recommendation or the suggestion put by Migrant Workers Centre Inc that they end the subcontracting arrangement with Trades Hall be completed. We accepted that, and I determined that no further funds ought to go to the Migrant Workers Centre until that be completed and furthermore that there be some more due diligence take place as to whether or not there were any other potential risks with the arrangement. So we had PricewaterhouseCoopers come in and do an audit of what the new arrangement would look like and also whether or not there were any unidentified risks that had not been considered. That assessment has taken place. The audit identified no risks under the new arrangement. However, we have said still no funds ought to go until that new arrangement is in place and the subcontracting arrangement is finalised.

Mr NEWBURY: Further to that, does Trades Hall have any relationship with the ‘Recovery together’ worker strategy, the \$4.5 million—budget paper 3, page 47? Is there any relationship in terms of that worker strategy?

Ms SPENCE: No.

Mr NEWBURY: Okay. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Newbury. Mr Hibbins.

Mr HIBBINS: Thanks, Chair. Thank you, Minister and your team, for appearing this afternoon. Does the funding in the budget in relation to your portfolio responsibilities in any way relate to the response to the royal commission into mental health?

Ms SPENCE: No. Not directly.

Mr HIBBINS: Okay. So any support for multicultural communities, there is no relationship between the portfolio responsibilities and—

Ms SPENCE: We do not have a direct responsibility for mental health services. However, the CALD Communities Taskforce does have a role in advising what effects to CALD communities there are and providing advice in regard to the implementation of the recommendations.

Mr HIBBINS: Okay. Yes. One of the main issues that we are hearing in regard to mental health services for CALD communities is the lack of specifically bilingual and multicultural mental health workers, because obviously it is a barrier if there are no actual workers who can actually speak a person’s language or any other culturally specific mental health services for CALD communities. Is there any support in the budget to meet those concerns?

Ms SPENCE: I am being advised that we have seconded someone to work with the Department of Health on this matter.

Ms MONAGLE: Minister, would you like me to jump in and expand on that?

Ms SPENCE: Yes, sorry.

Ms MONAGLE: No, that is fine. Thank you, Mr Hibbins. It is obviously a really important issue, and I would say that that is across all the portfolios in DFFH, about how we make sure that the implementation of the royal commission responds to all the specific needs of the range of populations across Victoria. So obviously for multicultural affairs—the multicultural population—given that almost I think it is half of people in Victoria have parents who were born overseas and about a third speak another language, it is vital that that is implemented in the way. At the minor level we have seconded over one of our staff to sit within the mental health royal commission implementation group to make sure that that lens is provided across all their work. In addition to that obviously I meet regularly with the deputy secretary, who is implementing that work, and that is in terms of implementation.

I would also say that there is obviously always an ongoing challenge in making sure that services support and have the right access to interpretation and translation for multicultural communities, but it goes to more than that, actually. It also goes into the nature of their experience. Often it is trauma informed and often it has certain cultural norms around access as well, so it is about supporting our community partners too, such as Foundation House, to provide support that really meets the needs of those individuals. So while there is not necessarily funding directly from the multi portfolio into mental health initiatives, it is absolutely at the forefront of the minds of people implementing.

Mr HIBBINS: Okay. Thank you. Can I ask a similar question in relation to the Royal Commission into Family Violence and whether there is any funding specifically for family violence services for multicultural communities?

Ms MONAGLE: Yes, if I can speak to that, too, Minister. There has been significant investment in terms of multicultural family violence, both in prevention, early intervention, and response, and I look after that too in the prevention of family violence portfolio that sits in my area as well. We work really closely with a range of organisations that provide that support. Really important in that service is that it is designed by victim-survivors and it provides access so that they can provide access to so-called mainstream services but also provide access to services that they feel more culturally connected to. Quite often victims of family violence from CALD communities prefer to go to mainstream services because they are worried that it will negatively impact on their relationships within the community, so it is really important that we provide those services. So in terms of the mainstream services that Family Safety Victoria provide, such as their risk assessment and information services, that is absolutely embedded, and then there are targeted programs, of which some are funded through a range of different portfolios, actually, including elder abuse as well, to support those in CALD communities who are victims and survivors of family violence.

Mr HIBBINS: Great. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, Mr Hibbins. That concludes the time we have set aside for consideration of the multicultural affairs portfolio with you 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 take a 5-minute break, and then we will resume with consideration of the youth affairs portfolio.

Witnesses withdrew.