

VERIFIED VERSION

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Budget Estimates 2016–17

Melbourne — 11 May 2016

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Witnesses

Mr Robin Scott, Minister for Multicultural Affairs,

Ms Rebecca Falkingham, Deputy Secretary, Social Policy and Service Delivery Reform, and

Mr Matte Lowe, Executive Director, Social Policy and Service Delivery Reform, Department of Premier and Cabinet.

The CHAIR — I declare open the public hearings for the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee inquiry into the 2016–17 budget estimates. All mobile telephones should now be turned to silent.

I would like to welcome the Minister for Multicultural Affairs, the Honourable Robin Scott, MP; Ms Rebecca Falkingham, Deputy Secretary, Social Policy and Service Delivery Reform; and Mr Matte Lowe, Executive Director, Social Policy and Service Delivery Reform, at the Department of Premier and Cabinet.

All evidence is taken by this committee under the provisions of the Parliamentary Committees Act, attracts parliamentary privilege and is protected from judicial review. Comments made outside the hearing, including on social media, are not afforded such privilege. Witnesses will not be sworn but are requested to answer all questions succinctly, accurately and truthfully. Witnesses found to be giving false or misleading evidence may be in contempt of Parliament and subject to penalty.

Questions from the committee will be asked on a group basis, meaning that specific times have been allocated to members of the government, opposition and crossbench to ask a series of questions in a set amount of time before moving on to the next group. I will advise witnesses who will be asking questions at each segment.

All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard, and you will be provided with proof versions of the transcript for verification as soon as available. Verified transcripts, presentations and handouts will be placed on the committee's website as soon as possible.

All written communication to witnesses can only be provided via officers of the PAEC secretariat. Members of the public gallery cannot participate in the committee's proceedings in any way. Members of the media must remain focused only on the persons speaking. Any filming and recording must cease immediately at the completion of the hearing.

I now invite the witness to make a very brief opening statement of no more than 5 minutes. This will be followed by questions from the committee.

Visual presentation.

Mr SCOTT — Thank you, Chair. It is a great pleasure to be here to talk about the government's policies and initiatives in the multicultural affairs portfolio, which I am sure is an area of priority for all members here. Victoria's multiculturalism is our greatest strength.

If you look at the graph on the screen — Victoria's cultural, linguistic and religious diversity is one of our defining features, and it is growing. Victorians originate from more than 200 countries, speak more than 200 languages and dialects and follow more than 130 faiths. The 2011 census shows nearly 47 per cent of Victorians were either born overseas or had one parent born overseas, and approximately 23 per cent of Victorians speak a language other than English at home.

Recent ABS data published on 30 March 2016 indicated that as of 20 June 2015 — it should be 30 June; I will check — Australia's overseas born proportion was the highest since the late 19th century. The graph in particular shows a significant increase between 2006 and 2011. Our growing diversity provides both opportunities and challenges.

Since coming to office the Andrews Labor government has achieved a great deal in the multicultural affairs portfolio. We have secured ongoing funding for the community grants program, honoured all election commitments, established the community resilience unit and initiatives through the ministerial task force on social cohesion and community resilience; and realigned the roles of the VMC and OMAC and appointed a new VMC chairperson and seven new commissioners. We are developing a whole new government multicultural policy.

This budget builds on our achievements to date by further strengthening funding allocations for multicultural affairs. The \$24.3 million in additional funding in 2016–17 for the portfolio comprises \$6.3 million over two years in additional funding to address the recommendations of the Royal Commission into Family Violence and support for Victoria's culturally diverse communities in preventing and responding to family violence; and \$18 million over four years in additional funding to support a coordinated, integrated and early intervention approach for the settlement of refugees and asylum seekers across Victoria, including additional refugee arrivals from Syria and Iraq.

The last two budgets have delivered multicultural affairs funding in new priority policy areas, including family violence, community resilience and LGBTI multicultural grants.

The graph illustrates that in two budgets we have nearly doubled the budget portfolio output from \$24.4 million to \$46.8 million. Given the continued growth in Victoria's multicultural diversity, this additional investment is critical. This growth also demands a whole-of-Victorian-government approach which recognises that multicultural communities need to access services across a range of portfolio areas.

Our multicultural society has contributed to a progressive and cosmopolitan state; it has contributed to Melbourne's enviable livability. However, challenges remain that require a new strategic whole-of-government approach to multicultural affairs, an approach that builds on the successes of the past to deal with the challenges of the future, with the VMC having a more strategic leadership role to deepen community engagement and unlock new partnership opportunities between communities, industry, sport, arts and education — all designed to facilitate social inclusion and equality of opportunity, economic participation and acceptance and belonging.

This approach is matched by the government's commitment to deliver an improved structural alignment for the multicultural affairs portfolio by driving more strategic and innovative partnership approaches which engage community and key sectors. In this budget we have also invested an additional \$113 million over five years to support improved outcomes for multicultural communities, including refugees and asylum seekers — and this is in other portfolio areas. This investment includes \$10.9 million over four years to meet priority health and welfare needs; \$49.1 million over five years to improve educational outcomes for refugee, asylum seeker and migrant young people; and \$53 million over four years through the Jobs Victoria Employment Network to assist disadvantaged jobseekers into work, including those from multicultural, refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds.

The additional whole-of-government spend which supports multicultural communities in this budget is 137.3 million, including spending in health, employment and education. Thank you.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Minister. We will have government questions until 4.17 p.m. Mr Dimopoulos.

Mr DIMOPOULOS — Thank you, Minister, and can I commend you on your stewardship of this portfolio. It is incredible, particularly the budget increases and your time management skills. You covered a fair bit in your presentation, but in budget paper 3, page 103, in terms of some of those investments, can you home in a bit more on investments in relation to community harmony — if you call it that — so the acceptance and inclusion of refugees and asylum seekers in the Victorian community. You talked about health outcomes and about education, so just more about essentially tackling racism and those kind of — —

Mr SCOTT — In terms of the line item that you have identified, the \$18 million over four years, that is to support a coordinated and integrated early intervention approach for the settlement of refugees and asylum seekers across Victoria. The fund will support increased funding for existing programs aimed at enhancing social participation and inclusion for newly arrived refugees and asylum seekers; implementation of new initiatives to improve access to services in the areas of early childhood, sport, art and justice; and engagement of strategic coordinators across Victoria to deliver improvements to coordinated place-based settlement and support services for refugee and asylum seeker communities, including in regional areas.

An important part of this in terms of a coordination role will be undertaken by the VMC chairperson, Helen Kapalos. She will be taking up a settlement leadership role to drive strategic partnership approaches to maximise settlement outcomes for refugees and asylum seekers in Victoria, particularly with the resettlement of refugees from Iraq and Syria.

The key initiatives include: a multicultural affairs sport strategy, focusing on harnessing commitment and engagement across national and state sporting bodies to maximise opportunity for refugee and asylum seeker communities to participate in sport through the funding of sporting registration, provision of subsidies or free tickets to major events. This strategy will also ensure gender equity and the inclusion of young women and girls, which is very important. The VMC is working closely with VicHealth to ensure a joined up approach. There has also been an engagement with the Department of Immigration and Border Protection to facilitate greater sharing of settlement and family violence information, and facilitate guest attendance by the Department of Immigration and Border Protection ethnic liaison officers and presentations with the VMC's advisory councils.

Mr DIMOPOULOS — Minister, thank you. I have heard you talk before about the Scanlon Foundation annual survey — is it annual? I cannot remember, but it is a periodic survey that talks about the acceptance of multiculturalism by the Victorian community. We are proud as a community to have such a high acceptance of diversity. Is there anything in relation to that aspect, community education and awareness? You talked about sport; that is an area obviously. Can you elaborate a bit more on those kinds of initiatives?

Mr SCOTT — It is a good question, because multiculturalism consists of a number of different aspects in Victoria, and the acceptance of the other — of people other than yourself — as being fundamentally legitimate and worthwhile, and according them the empathy, dignity and respect that every person deserves from society, regardless of their culture or religion, which country they were born in, which religion they adhere to, and which language they speak as a mother tongue, is something that is really critical. And it should be noted that in Victoria there is a very high level of acceptance of multiculturalism as a public policy. The Scanlon Foundation records it is over 85 per cent in their report, so I think we should put that in the context of the success. I would accord credit to previous administrations of a different political colour in this area as well; there has been very strong support over many years.

But in this area we have been looking to support work, including in the Community Harmony Program, where there is ongoing funding of 3 million per annum. There is 600 000 to enable Jewish and Muslim schools to develop and implement an emergency management plan to respond to any incidents of racial or religious intolerance, and there is also the work — the \$25 million work — to strengthen Victoria's social cohesion and community resilience. But much of the work of many multicultural community groups which are funded under the grants program is about bringing people together, and that is a really important understanding: that there are elements of multicultural affairs which are about the preservation and the strengthening of cultural identity as a multicultural member of a society which is based on an acceptance of diversity. But critical to that and the ability for that to continue is that people have an understanding between cultures and a respect between cultures.

I would note that there was a dinner, for example, last night — not last night, on Sunday night; I believe it was Sunday; it is a busy time at the moment, but in the last week — between the Jewish community and the African communities. It is an example like that — which was funded in part through the Office of Multicultural Affairs and Citizenship, and I note that there was participation there from the shadow minister and others, including the member for Caulfield — of events that bring people together and are encouraged to ensure that we have greater understanding. That is a key part of multicultural affairs in Victoria.

Mr DIMOPOULOS — Minister, is it also acceptance within communities of difference within those communities? And I commend you for the LGBTI grants. Just on those, can I ask you: I am not sure if they relate to the same output initiatives — yes, they do in fact. In the second line item, 4 million over the forward estimates, have you got any information about how many applications have been received? Are the applications closed?

Mr SCOTT — I will have to perhaps take that on notice, because they were recently announced, but I will check with the officials: do we have any information on how many applications have received?

Mr LOWE — I do not think we have, Minister.

Mr SCOTT — Not so far, but I can provide further information.

Mr DIMOPOULOS — Sure. I have had interest locally.

Mr SCOTT — It is very important to understand that within communities there is diversity, and so acceptance of persons within a diverse society does not stop at gender, it does not stop at race, it does not stop at sexual orientation. It is about ensuring that in a diverse, multicultural society there is broad acceptance of diversity and strong support. So we can provide some further information.

Mr DIMOPOULOS — Yes, that would be great. Finally, Minister, or maybe these will be the last couple of questions: in relation to the settlement and asylum seeker support, I imagine that line item relates to Victoria's commitment that the Premier outlined last year to take our share of the refugee cohort that the previous Prime Minister I think made a commitment on. We asked the Minister for Health, when she was before the committee earlier today, about the health outcomes, and she sort of made a few comments, but said it was essentially that the outcomes generally — I am not trying to put words in her mouth — are really in your portfolio. I just want

to get a sense: what are those? You have touched on some, but I also want to know how we measure success for settlement for those refugees over time?

Mr DIMOPOULOS — That is a very good question, because in fact part of the funding is \$1.5 million to ensure strategic coordination and better planning and coordination of place-based settlements. So a broader issue is that while there is a relative success in Victoria around settlement comparative to others — and particularly in terms of acceptance in multicultural affairs — I think it is incumbent on us, and in fact I would say that part of the work that has been undertaken on the new multicultural affairs policy is to try to work towards further outcomes-based policy in this area. And I think it would be fair to say that there is further work that is being undertaken in relation to that policy, but that will also generate further, more outcomes-focused policies, and I would say including in terms of what will come before this committee in terms of the output measures in the budget, because the Victorian government is committed to ensuring that we get more successful settlement.

I do not think we should accept the outcomes that have occurred up until now. There has been — if I could be frank about it — an overall positive story around multiculturalism in Victoria, but we should not pretend that we are a utopia and there are no social issues in existence in the society, and incumbent on us a community is to ensure the settlement of refugees, particularly those who come from some of the most disrupted societies in the world where they have not been afforded opportunities for education or participation. And I would note the funding that there has been in the health portfolio area for English as a second language, which I think is very important, particularly for those who have had their education interrupted in another jurisdiction. Refugees, almost invariably, come from places where there is not effective provision of the normal services that we take for granted, including education.

Ms SHING — Minister, I might take you to budget paper 3, page 9, if I may, and in relation to in particular ‘Preventing family violence in diverse communities’. I note that there is the \$6.3 million package to address family violence in response to the recommendations handed down by the Royal Commission into Family Violence. I note that we have only got 30 seconds left in this particular bracket of questions, but I would like to get you to start telling us a little more about how women from culturally diverse backgrounds experience challenges when seeking help with family violence, and how this package aims to address those challenges and barriers.

Mr SCOTT — Well in the 18 seconds that I have got left — —

Members interjecting.

Mr SCOTT — That is a very big question to address in 18 seconds. I suspect it may come up — —

Ms SHING — We have the next tranche to continue this work.

Mr SCOTT — There are a number of issues in terms of a new grants program and capacity building to relate to gender equity — —

The CHAIR — Order! Mr Smith, until 4.27 p.m.

Mr T. SMITH — Thank you, Chair. Minister, following the restructure of responsibilities of the Office of Multicultural Affairs and Citizenship, which you mentioned in your introductory remarks —

Mr SCOTT — I did.

Mr T. SMITH — and the Victorian multicultural affairs commission shifting most of the grant allocation responsibilities to the Office of Multicultural Affairs and Citizenship, and ultimately to your office and the Department of Premier and Cabinet, can you advise which individual grants and what proportion of total grants funding allocations are made by you and your office and which, including the proportion of total grants, is made by the Victorian multicultural affairs commission?

Mr SCOTT — Okay, I am happy to respond to that question because I think it is premised on a misunderstanding of the realignment. I am happy to take the committee through the changes. So there was a restructuring of the grants program, which was partially to respond to recommendations made by the Victorian Auditor-General. So the administration of grants is conducted by the Office of Multicultural Affairs and

Citizenship. The Victorian Multicultural Commission, however, plays a significant role — in fact, in some ways an expanded role — in relation to grants processes, because there is an assessment panel process in order to make recommendations on any grants. And the assessment panel comprises representatives — at least a representative; it can be representatives — of the Victorian Multicultural Commission, OMAC staff and independent experts.

Then there is a ratification process, and I think this is really important to understand. The Victorian Multicultural Commission ratifies grant decisions, and that includes a scope of grants that previously in fact were the responsibility simply of the Office of Multicultural Affairs and Citizenship, and I am sure you would be aware that the membership of the Victorian Multicultural Commission includes persons of diverse political backgrounds, including former Liberal Senator Tsebin Tchen. So an expanded number of grants require ratification by the Victorian Multicultural Commission. I have not, as minister, varied those recommendations that have been received. So where applications have been made and gone through an expert panel process, which includes representatives of the Victorian Multicultural Commission, it is then ratified by the Victorian Multicultural Commission. I have not made variations to that process — those recommendations, which have been ratified, including, as I said, by a process which includes a former Liberal senator. So I think the inference that has been drawn and the analysis that has been drawn related to the process is erroneous.

So as has been the practice, including under the former minister and now leader of the Liberal Party, there are occasions where there have been extenuating circumstances that have prevented organisations from participating in the scheduled funding round. That is included in examples such as the Bendigo Festival of Cultures, which involved a \$60 000 grant to the Loddon Campaspe Multicultural Services, and the Somali cultural celebration, with \$10 000 to Youth Activating Youth. But that is very much the exception. So the inference that you have given that somehow my office and the department is running the grants program in a greater degree is actually erroneous, and in fact there is, I would say — and there is an allocation, and I —

Mr T. SMITH — You have never seen — you do not get to see — any applications at all?

Mr SCOTT — No. I will respond to that. So I did outline that there are occasions — and that was certainly the practice under the previous government — where there are circumstances, and a small number of circumstances, where there is funding outside of the grant application rounds. That has been the previous practice. But the vast majority of grants go through the normal process, and I have not varied the recommendations as they have been approved, as they have been ratified, by the Victorian Multicultural Commission. So I think that there is a misunderstanding of the process. And in fact, I am quite — the Victorian Multicultural Commission has its own — there has been a previous funding. There is a funding, and I think it is \$150 000, from memory?

Ms FALKINGHAM — Yes, that is right.

Mr SCOTT — One hundred and fifty thousand dollars of funding, of allocation, where similarly if there are issues that arise outside of the funding round, where the Victorian — —

Mr T. SMITH — That is at your discretion?

Mr SCOTT — No, the Victorian Multicultural Commission's discretion. So there is a reporting requirement related to that, but I can provide some further information on that. So the Community Support Fund, formerly the Chairperson Sponsorship Program, provides small grants to community organisations in order to address issues of urgent need or for activities that fall outside the scope of a regular grants program. There is a funding allocation from within the VMC budget of \$150 000, but that is not my funding allocation. Again, I think there is a misunderstanding. The grants are approved by a panel consisting of the VMC chairperson, deputy chairperson, and the director of OMAC.

Mr T. SMITH — Hang on, can you just slow down a bit? What was that?

Mr SCOTT — The grants are approved by a panel consisting of the VMC chairperson, deputy chairperson, Mr Ross Alatsas, and the director of OMAC. I can provide some examples of funding if that would be of assistance to the committee on what has been funded through this process within the VMC, if you would wish.

Mr T. SMITH — That is fine. We will take it on notice, if you like. Thank you very much.

Ms SHING — Or if you like.

Mr T. SMITH — Pardon?

Ms SHING — You can request it on notice.

Mr T. SMITH — Well, I have. It is late in the afternoon, Ms Shing.

BP3, page 296, Minister, which is the deliverables, and indeed consultations for your portfolio. Why has there been a decrease in consultations with culturally and linguistically diverse communities from 2014–15 to 15–16 at a time when consultation is critical to the obvious emerging challenges to social cohesion and particularly given the enormous growth in population, and as you have already suggested in your introductory remarks, your quite substantial increase in the budget?

Mr SCOTT — I am happy to provide some further information on notice. I note there is a decrease of 2 from 62 to 60 in the expected outcome.

Mr T. SMITH — I appreciate that, but within the scope — —

Mr SCOTT — I can provide some further information — —

Mr T. SMITH — In the context of substantial population growth and indeed your own increasing budget, I just find it quite curious.

Mr SCOTT — I will go through this. So the engagement there which relates to the matter has involved 24 regional advisory council meetings held across regional Victoria. I want to check, actually, the detail of some of this. I do not want to give an apples and oranges answer. I am happy to provide some further information on notice about that matter.

Mr T. SMITH — That would be appreciated. If I could turn to an issue I raised yesterday, Minister, with regard to the play that has created such concern within the Jewish community. I am just wondering will you make representations on behalf of the Jewish community to the Department of Education and Training and indeed to the minister to have that play removed from the curriculum for next year?

Mr SCOTT — I am certainly aware of the issues that were raised in the previous hearing with Minister Merlino. I note the information that was provided in relation to the decision-making process, I believe, and that certainly has been made in relation to decisions made by the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, not the decision to what is included in the curriculum being made by that body rather than by government. I also understand the advice that has been provided in relation to VCE drama teachers focusing on the dramatic aspects of the play while providing an even-handed explanation of the political context. I have been contacted by members of the Jewish community in relation to these matters, and the Jewish Community Council of Victoria. There was an email sent to me and a number of other persons in relation to this matter. I have undertaken to have a meeting with them, because it is an organisation that I think plays a very positive role — —

Mr T. SMITH — Is that JCCV or Zionism Victoria?

Mr SCOTT — JCCV. I said the Jewish Community Council of Victoria. It is an organisation that pays a very significantly positive role — —

Mr T. SMITH — I know. I have met with Jennifer as well.

Mr SCOTT — I have not had that meeting. That is occurring next week, so I have not had that meeting yet. But I certainly understand the context in which they raise a number of issues on behalf of the Jewish community and do an excellent job.

Mr T. SMITH — But are you going to make representations with regard to the curriculum, because they want it removed?

Mr SCOTT — I am not pre-empting the discussion that I will have, and with all due respect, I believe they speak for themselves.

Mr T. SMITH — Thanks for that, but — —

Mr SCOTT — Also I note that this is a decision — —

The CHAIR — Order! Dr Carling-Jenkins until 4.31 p.m.

Dr CARLING-JENKINS — Thank you, Chair, and welcome back, Minister. I hope your voice is holding out there. I want to thank you for your presentation as well and commend you for your commitment to a strategic and whole-of-government approach to the issues that you described. I would like to draw your attention to budget paper 3, page 104. Mr Dimopoulos actually pointed out the line item that I would also like to speak to, and that is around the humanitarian settlement support. Repeated reference has been made in the budget papers here and elsewhere to a range of programs to assist in the settlement of humanitarian arrivals, and I commend that initiative. I am just wondering if you could inform the committee of precisely which programs are contained within this range and who will be delivering these programs.

Mr SCOTT — Some of it relates to areas that have been funded within the multicultural affairs portfolio, and there are also programs that I will touch upon before getting to that, which I have alluded to, but I think it is important that there are other elements of Victorian government that will be providing assistance in this area, including particularly the department of health. There is the funding in budget paper 3, page 79, of the \$10.9 million. There are the educational outcomes, which is \$9.4 million over five years. There is the English-as-a-second-language program which will take place in — and I can — —

Dr CARLING-JENKINS — I appreciate that; I am particularly looking at the 4.5 million annually for four years.

Mr SCOTT — There are a number of programs funded, including the refugee action program, the rights and responsibilities program and the asylum seekers support program. I can get further detail on those programs.

Dr CARLING-JENKINS — I am happy for you to take that on notice, if that is easier.

Mr SCOTT — In terms of getting a fulsome answer, yes, that is probably easier, so I can provide some more information.

Dr CARLING-JENKINS — Thank you. I appreciate that, Minister. Then if I could move on to acknowledge the whole-of-government response to family violence in budget paper 3, pages 9 and 10, where it says there are target initiatives for cultural and linguistically diverse communities, \$1 million over the next two years, which ‘will be delivered by an enhanced inTouch Multicultural Centre against family violence and other providers’. I would just invite you to speak to this initiative, particularly in reference to the proportion of money going to inTouch versus the proportion of money going to other providers and whether these other providers are being approached, so inviting submissions or if this is an open grant process.

Mr SCOTT — The grant guidelines have not yet been published, so there is a little bit of information that was not yet in the public domain and is under consideration within the department. In terms of the relative spending, my memory of it is it is approximately \$750 000 for the grant programs and \$250 000 for inTouch.

Dr CARLING-JENKINS — That is the proportion?

Mr SCOTT — Yes, I can confirm the \$250 000 as the proportion in relation to that allocation.

Dr CARLING-JENKINS — Thank you, Minister. When will the guidelines be available?

Mr SCOTT — In the next six weeks.

Dr CARLING-JENKINS — In the next six weeks. Thank you.

Mr SCOTT — And they will be publicly available, obviously.

Dr CARLING-JENKINS — Okay. So it is going to be a public grant process, rather than an invited submission process; is that right? It might be easier for — —

Ms FALKINGHAM — There are two aspects. The first is that the government has committed to the urgent and crisis demand.

Dr CARLING-JENKINS — Okay. So that is the invited part.

Ms FALKINGHAM — That is exactly right. And then there will be an element — —

The CHAIR — Order. Ms Shing until 4.36 p.m.

Ms SHING — Thanks very much. I look to that being provided perhaps on notice to Dr Carling-Jenkins around finishing that off.

Minister, we were in the process of just beginning to talk about the barriers experienced by women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds when countering family violence and seeking help for instances of family violence. I believe that you were in the process of talking about the way in which the funding outlined at BP3, page 9, was going to assist in achieving that. If you can also talk about the way in which culturally diverse communities will be supported to address gender equality and family violence prevention, not just within metropolitan areas but more broadly across regional Victoria, too, if you might.

Mr SCOTT — It is a very good question and I think I will be able to answer more fulsomely than I was able to in 18 seconds. Women and children from diverse cultural backgrounds face a number of really complex and intersecting barriers to accessing family violence services, including a limited knowledge. We make assumptions about access to knowledge in the society that are sometimes erroneous. On occasions we do not understand that there are persons who exist in worlds without access to mainstream information, particularly where there are language barriers to it and a failure of services to provide appropriate language supports.

The impact of immigration policy and immigration status on women's experience of violence and fear of seeking help; the failure of service providers to provide culturally responsive support; and community, cultural and societal expectations and pressures that can exist within some of our multicultural communities, including traditional gender roles, expectation in marriage, religious customs, fear, and alienation from community, as well as expectations regarding sexual orientation and gender identity. I know that the member for Oakleigh touched upon the grant process around LGBTI issues in our CALD communities.

The new funding will address a range of these barriers which prevent women and children from diverse backgrounds accessing timely and culturally responsive family violence services to ensure that women can access support from a more visible specialist statewide multicultural family service provider — and we are talking about inTouch there and some of the funding going there; appropriate language services are available; complex legal immigration or visa issues are addressed; and the responsiveness of universal mainstream and specialist family violence services are improved through partnership training, workforce development and co-design with communities.

In terms of gender equity, that actually is a really important issue and that is in part addressed through the new family violence branch with a capacity-building and participation program to build capacity in relation to gender equity, women's leadership and women's financial literacy. We do not, I think, at times as a community — I mean this in a very non-partisan way — address power relationships in how we describe public policy. It is very important that women have greater access within all parts of the society. While there are policies at a governmental level around issues like governmental boards, we need to understand that gender equality permeates all levels of our society, and it is really important that we understand that empowering — I used the word earlier in a different thing — is sometimes a misused word, but empowerment of women to have more agency in their own life and to have more control, including in issues as practical as financial literacy for persons who are financially dependent upon another individual and do not have access to the options that exist in the lives of individuals. So grant funding around that basis is really designed to genuinely empower. As I said, I think it is sometimes a misused word, but in this context it really has meaning.

Ms SHING — Thanks, Minister. I would like to take you to budget paper 3, page 297, and ask that you provide some information about how the culturally diverse communities in regional Victoria can thrive as a consequence of or following consolidation of the multicultural grants program.

Mr SCOTT — I think it is important to note that the proportion of grants approved which is provided to organisations in regional and rural areas is at 20 per cent. That is higher than the proportion of individuals who are born overseas and who live in regional and rural areas. So there is an explicit policy to ensure that a greater proportion of grants go to those regional and rural areas when considering the proportion of persons who are born overseas, because we understand as a government — as previous governments have, to be fair — that there are — —

The CHAIR — Order. Mr O'Brien until 4.41 p.m.

Ms SHING — If you can include that on notice, that would be appreciated. Thanks, Minister.

Mr D. O'BRIEN — Minister, the budget paper reference is the same as Ms Shing's, pages 296 and 297 of BP3. Given the Moomba CBD riots and the related assaults and the subsequent arrests in that, the robberies, carjackings and violent home invasions that have been perpetrated allegedly by the Apex gang and various copycats, that we have had increased concerns about violence targeting Chinese international students a couple of weeks ago and Chinese tourists raising concerns about safety and damage to our international reputation, potentially impacting on Chinese and other Asian tourism and also the establishment of Taskforce Tense by police six months ago, why have you not established a multi-agency task force to tackle some of these significant challenges?

Mr SCOTT — I think there are a few implicit assumptions in that question that I will unpick. Firstly, in terms of responding to these issues, there has been a very significant response in one of my other portfolio areas, which I may be questioned about in another context in a few days. There has been a very significant expansion of policing resources to deal with criminal activity, including in the anti-gang space and over 400 new police. There are some matters that are not subject to public announcement, so I am limited and revolve around cabinet processes, but the assumption that there is not coordinated work, including interdepartmental — I can certainly confirm there is an IDC in place that relate to these matters. So the assumption that there is no coordinated response across government is not well founded.

Mr D. O'BRIEN — Given the community concern, though, over these issues that I have raised, would it not be better for the government to be leading from the front and saying, 'These are the things we are doing' both from a crime prevention aspect, which I acknowledge you have talked about, but from the multicultural perspective as well?

Mr SCOTT — I will respond. Firstly, there is work that has been undertaken. I will be careful with what I say in relation to a range of matters that have been raised. The advice that has been provided, and I have obviously been in close contact with the Chief Commissioner of Police on a range of these matters, and the presumption that there is a single group — I am not saying you have said that — —

Mr D. O'BRIEN — No, not at all.

Mr SCOTT — Sometimes there is an erroneous view around the nature of what is occurring in the society in relation to some of the criminal activity you are describing and allegations of certain groups being involved with the exclusion of other groups, so I think we should be careful about describing. In terms of dealing with the Chinese community, I want to be careful because there are some operational matters that I feel constrained in enunciating, which I am aware of from another portfolio area. Needless to say, there has been some quite close consultation between areas of the Victorian government. I do feel constrained in what I can say, but there is work ongoing, I can assure you, in this area, some of which relates to operational matters in another portfolio, which I feel somewhat constrained in responding to. I think it should be important not to make assumptions about the nature of offending — I will say that. I am not making any inference towards yourself — —

Mr D. O'BRIEN — No, and I am not making that suggestion, but is it not important, though, Minister, for you as the multicultural affairs minister to be leading from the front on these issues, particularly on those where there is clearly public concern about ethnic communities and ethnic gangs and on behalf of ethnic communities — the Chinese or others and, following on from Mr Smith's question, the Jewish community?

Mr SCOTT — I certainly meet with members and representatives of the Chinese community. There has been funding specifically provided by this government in the last budget about the welfare of overseas students — a grant program was provided of \$1 million a year. This has been a government quite committed to

the welfare of the Chinese community and the Indian community and other students who come out here. I certainly have a deep personal connection since my wife is of course a former overseas student of Chinese background. There are specific allocations of resources that have been made in order to ensure the effective service provision for Chinese and other overseas students — —

The CHAIR — Order! Ms Pennicuik, you have got 4 minutes.

Ms PENNICUIK — Thank you, Chair. Minister, obviously in this portfolio there is the whole-of-government approach, so a lot of the spending is dispersed across other departments. Just today in the short time we have had available we have gone towards the culturally and linguistically diverse communities family violence response. We have had a conversation that has been a bit stop-start. Can I just follow up on some of the things that we have been talking about? That is in budget paper3, pages 8, 9, 10 and 16. Firstly there is the \$3.3 million grants project. One of the comments is the enhanced inTouch Multicultural Centre, so if you could talk about what that means. Also, what will the approach to CALD communities be with regard to family violence prevention and gender equality in terms of a relational approach versus a service delivery approach? If you could speak to that issue as well in whatever short amount of time we have.

Mr SCOTT — I understand. The new funding will be provided to establish the inTouch Multicultural Centre Against Family Violence as a specialist statewide family violence service and peak body to support more responsive services across the state specifically targeted for multicultural communities. If you are looking at the role, if I understood your question correctly, in terms of the coordination with multicultural communities, I think that one of the roles that will be played, as was played in terms of the royal commission, and it is a function of the Victorian Multicultural Commission, is an important function in terms of being a communicator to government.

I can provide some further information on funding, but there is an important function the Victorian Multicultural Commission has as being, in effect, a voice for multicultural communities in government. In fact that is one of the key purposes of the realignment I have been describing — to get the VMC a greater role in influencing government decision-making. So there is an important role that will be played by the Victorian Multicultural Commission. The Victorian Multicultural Commission has already been involved in the process by preparing a submission, so it plays a functional role in ensuring that the voices of various multicultural communities in our diverse society are heard in relation to this issue. There will be an ongoing role that they have in influencing government public policy in this area.

Ms PENNICUIK — Thank you, Minister. In terms of the specific questions about the enhanced inTouch Multicultural Centre, is that more staff? Is that a different role?

Ms FALKINGHAM — Given the government has already invested in family violence, it was thought it was more important to have a specialist family violence service, and inTouch currently provides a lot of those services. This money will enhance their services so they can provide more around-the-clock services — so looking at both that early intervention but also the targeted response at the specialist end.

Ms PENNICUIK — And will that go to — I do not know if you were talking in terms of the VMC — the types of approaches that need to be — —

Mr SCOTT — What I was describing with the VMC is really a function that it has to be a voice in relation to public policy and public policy interventions, including government interventions and government-funded interventions. One of the critical functions the Victorian Multicultural Commission plays is really to be a conduit for the needs of multicultural communities. I think Helen Kapalos as the chair has been particularly passionate about family violence and ensuring that voices are heard. That is going to be an ongoing function — —

The CHAIR — I would like to thank the witnesses for their attendance — the Minister for Multicultural Affairs, the Honourable Robin Scott, Ms Falkingham and Mr Lowe. The committee will follow up on any questions taken on notice in writing. A written response should be provided within 14 calendar days of that request.

Committee adjourned.