

VERIFIED VERSION

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Budget Estimates 2013–14

Melbourne — 24 May 2013

Members

Mr N. Angus

Ms J. Hennessy

Mr D. Morris

Mr D. O'Brien

Mr C. Ondarchie

Mr M. Pakula

Mr R. Scott

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Witnesses

Ms H. Victoria, Minister for Women's Affairs;

Ms G. Callister, Secretary,

Mr J. Higgins, Executive Director, Corporate Services Group,

Ms K. Haire, Deputy Secretary, Community and Executive Services, and

Mr H. Klein, Director, Disability, Women and Youth, Department of Human Services.

The CHAIR — I declare open the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee hearing on the 2013-14 budget estimates for the portfolios of women’s affairs, consumer affairs and the arts. On behalf of the committee I welcome the Honourable Heidi Victoria, Minister for Women’s Affairs, and from the Department of Human Services: Ms Gill Callister, secretary; Mr Jim Higgins, executive director, corporate services group; Ms Katy Haire, deputy secretary, community and executive services; and Mr Harald Klein, director, disability, women and youth. Members of Parliament, departmental officers, members of the public and the media are also welcome.

In accordance with the guidelines for public hearings, I remind members of the public gallery that they cannot participate in any way in the committee’s proceedings. Only officers of the committee secretariat are to approach committee members. Departmental officers, as requested by the minister or her chief of staff, can approach the table during the hearings to provide information to the minister, by leave of myself as Chair. Written communication to witnesses can only be provided via officers of the PAEC secretariat. Members of the media are also requested to observe the guidelines for filming or recording proceedings in the Legislative Council committee room. All evidence is taken by this committee under the provisions of the Parliamentary Committees Act, attracts parliamentary privilege and is protected from judicial review. Any comments made outside the precincts of the hearing are not protected by parliamentary privilege, including any comments made on social media from the hearing itself. The committee has determined that there is no need for evidence to be sworn; however, witnesses are reminded that all questions must be answered in full and with accuracy and truthfulness. Any persons found to be giving false or misleading evidence may be in contempt of Parliament, and subject to penalty.

All evidence given today is being recorded. Witnesses will be provided with proof versions of the transcript for fact verification within two working days of this hearing. Unverified transcripts and PowerPoint presentations will be placed on the committee’s website immediately following receipt, to be replaced by verified transcripts within five days of receipt. Following a presentation by the minister, committee members will ask questions relating to the inquiry. Generally the procedure followed will be that relating to questions in the Legislative Assembly. Sessional orders provide a time limit for answers to questions without notice of 4 minutes, while standing orders do not permit supplementary questions. It is my intention to exercise discretion in both matters; however, I do request that witnesses answer each question as succinctly as is reasonable, recognising that many responses may include a degree of complexity. I ask that all mobile telephones be turned off or turned to silent.

I now call on the minister to give a brief presentation of no more than 5 minutes on the more complex financial and performance information relating to the budget estimates for the women’s affairs portfolio. Welcome, Minister.

Overheads shown.

Ms VICTORIA — Thank you, Chair. It is a delight to be here; I thank you and committee members. It is a great opportunity for me to be able to come here today to discuss some of the achievements of the women’s affairs portfolio. The government has a specific focus on women. The Victorian government has done much to improve the social and economic status of women, but there is more to be done. There is still inequality between women and men in some areas, including pay, leadership positions and economic participation. The inequality between men and women has a significant social and economic cost. Raising productivity through increased levels of workforce participation among women is particularly important in Victoria. We do not have the natural resource endowments of some of the other states.

Under new portfolio arrangements I will lead the programs relating to women’s economic participation, leadership and the status of women. Minister Wooldridge will continue to oversee Victoria’s action plan to address violence against women and children, and this is due to its strong relationship with other community services portfolio areas.

The Office of Women’s Affairs is the Victorian government’s lead agency on issues relating to Victorian women. The office supports women by providing a whole-of-government performance focus on women’s economic participation and leadership, promoting the status of women and preventing and reducing violence against women and their children.

The Victorian government supports the increased representation of women in leadership roles in both the public and private sectors. Two important programs support the inclusion of women on boards — the Victorian Women’s Governance Scholarship program and the Victorian Women’s Register. In 2011–12 we provided \$200 000 to the Victorian Local Governance Association to undertake workshops, information sessions and a mentoring program to encourage and engage women to become councillors. The Think Women for Local Government project has been incredibly successful and contributed to an increase of women councillors and female mayors.

This government proudly supports the Victorian Honour Roll of Women. It celebrates and acknowledges the outstanding contribution of remarkable women throughout Victoria. It acknowledges their vision, leadership, commitment, hard work and exceptional contribution to their communities or areas of expertise. The Queen Victoria Women’s Centre is a hub for women’s issues, ideas and leadership. It crosses ages, cultures, interests and localities, and offers a range of support and information services to women. The centre has performed well against its 2011–12 key performance indicators.

Increasing the participation of women in the workforce is critical to Victoria’s future prosperity. The graph, as you see here, shows that for women in the lowest two socioeconomic groups the proportion of women not in the labour force exceeds the proportion of women employed. It is for this reason that the Victorian government is allocating \$2.4 million towards a strategy that will support marginalised women in the most disadvantaged communities to improve their economic participation and leadership.

The women’s economic participation strategy, which will begin to be implemented later this year, has three priorities: firstly, working with partners to demonstrate new models for assisting marginalised women into employment; secondly, researching the best way we can support women into employment and improve their financial security; and finally, establishing partnerships with businesses and communities to promote gender equality in the workplace. It will also explore ways in which we can encourage women into non-traditional work. The 2013–14 Victorian government budget contains a wide range of initiatives that will support Victorian women. These initiatives will support women in their role as carers, support vulnerable women and their children and support women’s economic participation.

This year’s budget commits \$46.3 million to support Victorian children in their critical years before school. This includes \$34.3 million over five years for an additional 1000 early childhood intervention places each year to support children with a disability or developmental delay. There are upgrades to children’s centres and kindergartens worth \$7 million, the establishment of three mother-baby units in regional Victoria for Victorian women with mental illness and their infants, and family and education programs to be delivered by the Arts Centre Melbourne.

This budget supports the most vulnerable people in our communities with funding to support women and children experiencing family violence and young people who have experienced family breakdown. Additional support of \$3.8 million is also provided for men’s behaviour change programs and programs tackling adolescent violence in the home.

There are many other initiatives we are funding, which I hope we will get time to explore during questions, including opportunities to upgrade qualifications, wage increases for social and community service workers and financial counselling services.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Minister. We have just on 20 minutes for questions, so without further ado, Mr Angus.

Mr ANGUS — Minister, I refer you to budget paper 3, page 168, and the related output group ‘Empowering individuals and communities’. In the context of the 2013–14 budget, can you outline to the committee a key example of asset investment in your portfolio area which will benefit the women of Victoria and our community in general?

Ms VICTORIA — I thank you very much for the opportunity to be able to talk on this because this is certainly a very exciting part of what we can do in the women’s affairs portfolio. One place I am very proud that we look after in the women’s affairs portfolio is the Queen Victoria Women’s Centre. It is a heritage-listed building, some of you may know it as the old hospital, on Lonsdale Street, and it is run by the Queen Victoria Women’s Centre Trust. In 2011 there was a heritage restoration and maintenance plan that was developed by

specialist architects, Lovell Chen, and one of the things that they had to have a good look at was how the building was faring. They wanted to look at the preservation of the building, obviously, for all people. This is a building that was given over to the women of Victoria during the Kennett era as a place that they could come together, share ideas, have mentorships, and that sort of thing. It is an old building so they had to look at the heritage aspect of it in regard to building maintenance works and there are some priority areas that we need to address in the 12 or 13 years since that has gone ahead and started.

Last year's budget gave \$500 000 towards some restoration and maintenance works for the heritage building, the most urgent of which was the roof restoration. I am pleased to say that work has been completed within this financial year. There was a new roof membrane system that had to be put in. They also had to improve water drainage so that there was no damage to the building because there had been some water damage, unfortunately, to such a beautiful heritage building. The atrium has also been refreshed and a rooftop terraced. These have been really good because they are spaces that people can come in to have events and the restoration and redoing of those areas has seen a great increase in revenue from hiring those spaces out. It has been worthwhile on a twofold basis, obviously to look after the building, but also to be able to give them usable space again.

Lovell Chen have decided that they need to do further analysis of the work that needs to be done there and so we are planning at the moment for the next stage of restorations. We need to develop an approach to work on the facade of the building, which will be next, and a full suite of works will need to be undertaken over the next few years, and certainly that will be something that we will be focusing on.

A little bit about the women's centre: it is not only a heritage building; it is also a not-for-profit organisation. As I said, the intention, when it was set up by the Kennett government, was to be an area where people could exchange information but also where women could access services. There are some wonderful tenants in there at the moment, and that is another good reason why we have had to spend the money on this particular asset. It is also a great place where women can come and undertake projects.

There are lots of great not-for-profit organisations. One that springs to mind is Fitted for Work, which I know some of our female members of Parliament donate to, and certainly all my old suits go there. It is an opportunity for women who have not been in the workforce for quite some time, and perhaps do not have the means to be able to suit themselves up appropriately and get themselves ready for the interview process again, to go along and be fitted for work, as the name suggests. They also have a wonderful series of mentors there, if you like, who can coach the women in interview situations and hopefully bring them back to economic participation, and make them feel good about themselves before they walk into that interview.

Restoring this building has been a key aspect of this to make sure that we have got a place that is not only sound but also has the feeling that it is worthy of the people who are coming in. We are trying to, obviously, uplift these women, and the last thing you want to do is have a crumbling building; hence the reason there has been such investment in this particular asset.

Ms HENNESSY — Minister, I want to ask a question about the Office of Women's Affairs budget which is outlined at BP 3, page 169. There is a cut to the Office of Women's Affairs budget of 1.4 million from 8.5 million in 2012–13 to 7.1 million in 2013–14. I note that the note in the budget papers say that reflects the completion of fixed-term budget initiatives, but if you could just explain what is it that will stop being done, what has driven that reduction.

Ms VICTORIA — I thank you very much for your question. I want to say that what the Office of Women's Affairs is delivering to Victorian women I am extremely proud of, and the programs that we do have in place are good value — seeing as we are talking budget — for the Australian people and specifically for the Victorian taxpayer. I am really proud of what we are able to do.

Our commitments to Victorian women, as I have mentioned, and some of the programs that we deliver with the money that you are talking about here, are to do with economic, social and civic participation. The office is actively and very effectively engaged with a large number of Victorian women through the delivery of our programs, and I will give you an idea of where some of that money is going. There is over \$140 000 that is provided for strategic engagement activities for Victorian women. There is also an email alert system, and we have become quite tech-savvy, I have got to say, which is great because a lot of women are choosing now to

receive their information in newer ways, not just on paper, so we are alerting women of board vacancies and there are some 2200 women on the Victorian Women's Register.

For those who do still want to receive their information by paper, a lot of the investment there has been to deliver *Network*, which is a magazine, out to some 11 000 subscribers, mainly rural and regional ladies there. We have also done targeted consultation in that space, I have got to say, to make sure that that is in fact the best use of that money. As I said, when Minister Wooldridge had round table conversations with regional and rural women last year — and she held two of those in two different areas and there were 10 representative women at each of those round tables — they ascertained that perhaps this was not the way that women of today are liking getting their information. So that is under review at the moment, but until now we have been putting that out. That has just celebrated 25 years as a publication, as a magazine. We are going to make sure that that actually goes out in a very targeted way in the future.

We also maintain the Victorian Women's Register, which I think is an incredibly important tool. Again, as I say, there are about 2200 women on that who have decided that they want to be eligible to go onto boards. Some of them are serving on boards, some of them feel as though they are just ready to be on boards, and it is a good way for them to know what leadership positions are coming up. Of course we are helping that by making sure that those who want to become more board-ready or want to go further onto more significant boards have that opportunity. I will talk about that now. I think it is a good time to be able to spruik our women's governance scholarships, which we do in conjunction with the Australian Institute of Company Directors.

Ms HENNESSY — Which I think are terrific, but it was about the cuts.

Ms VICTORIA — You like that? I am glad you like that.

The CHAIR — Order!

Ms VICTORIA — This is actually something that I think we should be spruiking, but what I wanted to do I suppose is tell you what it is that we are doing. Now obviously there is a change in the budget from 2012–13, so these are all initiatives that we are carrying through, and I am very proud to say we are carrying through. And as I say, we are making sure that money is being spent appropriately, hence the review of the register and the review of the magazine as well — *Network*.

There has been a rebalancing of the women's affairs budget for this year. There are some programs that have concluded, and they were finite. They are in the area of family violence, but I want to clarify for you this is not a reduction. This is an area that obviously the government has targeted and reinvigorated with new policies, and as I mentioned before, Minister Wooldridge is looking after the area of family violence. You have had an opportunity to talk to her about that, but what we want to do is make sure that we can deliver better outcomes for women and families who have been subject to horrific situations and domestic violence. What we have done is there were two programs that were running that the new initiative — so what we are calling 'the plan', 'the strategy' — has actually taken over from. Again it is a more targeted use of the money but a far more effective delivery of services, and I think that probably explains what it is that you wanted to know.

Ms HENNESSY — Thank you. That clarifies that for me. I suppose my supplementary also goes to the activities of the Office of Women's Affairs around improving the representation of women in public sector leadership positions. We have sat through these hearings, and there have been some notable exceptions — and Ms Callister is indeed one of them — but for a number of the public sector departments when you have had the secretary here and the executive here, we have had a number of all-male teams: DPC and DTF particularly come to mind.

The CHAIR — Not DTF.

Ms HENNESSY — DTF was not on budget day?

The CHAIR — No.

Ms HENNESSY — When the Treasurer gave his evidence.

The CHAIR — No, I think you will find the deputy secretary that was sitting where Ms Callister is sitting was actually not a bloke.

Mr ONDARCHIE — Melissa was here.

The CHAIR — She might take exception.

Ms HENNESSY — Certainly, I will stand to be corrected and very happily so. But my point remains: there have been a number of all-male teams, and if not, male-dominated public service and senior executive teams giving evidence to this hearing throughout the course of this inquiry. My question is: what measures does the government intend to undertake, or the Office of Women's Affairs specifically, to improve the representation of women at senior and executive positions within the public service?

Ms VICTORIA — I am delighted that I am surrounded by very capable women here at the table.

Ms HENNESSY — Absolutely, as I say 'with notable exceptions', which has been delightful but sadly the exception to the rule.

Ms VICTORIA — Each area decides who is most fit for the position, and I am delighted to have these very capable women and Simone down the end who has been invaluable in preparation of the slides and all the information. I am very proud of who we have here at the table but also within the whole department.

Mr ONDARCHIE — And we have Ms Hennessy at the table too.

Ms VICTORIA — Of course.

Ms HENNESSY — This committee is another case in point, may I say, Minister.

Ms VICTORIA — I am not going to touch that one.

Ms HENNESSY — I don't expect you to.

Ms VICTORIA — But can I say that the Victorian public service is predominantly a female workforce, with some I think it is 67 per cent or so of women who are representative as members of the workforce in the public service. The comparable rate at a commonwealth level is well under 60 per cent, so I think we are actually punching above our weight down here in Victoria. About 40 per cent of all executive positions in the public service are female as of last year, and that is up from just 35 per cent in 2006, so in fact we have been on the increase. It is probably not as fast as I would like it to have been, but it is on the increase, and I am really proud of that. The Victorian labour force proportion of women is at 45.8 per cent, so we are actually doing particularly well there. As I say, we are slightly higher than what the commonwealth has got and the proportion of female executives has increased across all classifications. Of course it is not just about the public service; it is about what we are doing as the Office of Women's Affairs about women on boards and in senior management positions.

We are certainly equipping women as well as we can, and some of the programs we have in place are designed exactly for that. I alluded briefly to the Australian Institute of Company Directors program and the scholarships, and I am very proud to say that I have just signed off on another 34 ladies who will be able to participate in that. They have come from all walks of life. They have come from all parts of the state, and these are women who have been sitting on boards in some capacity. The qualification there is that it has to be a government funded not-for-profit, but they felt as though they wanted to take more of a leadership role and have not been able to do that in their present circumstances, so we have given them that leg up, if you like. This is obviously something that was implemented last year, instigated by Minister Wooldridge, and I am so pleased we had the opportunity to be able to do that. It is also about getting women into the workforce and starting them in economic participation and then giving that encouragement, and we obviously have an economic participation strategy, if I have got time —

The CHAIR — We are now 10 minutes into this question.

Ms VICTORIA — Okay; sorry. Across the board obviously we would encourage as many women as possible to become participants in the economy, and the public service is no different. I am pleased at where we are compared with where we were, but there is always more to be done, and certainly we encourage more women to apply for leadership positions. I think there is great opportunity there for women to come forward and put their hand up, and we will do everything we can to make sure that that is possible for them.

Mr O'BRIEN — Minister, congratulations on your elevation to the ministry. I would like to ask you another question about the number of women participating in funded projects relating to policy development, which is a measure on page 168 of budget paper 3. What I would like to ask you is: can you explain what the government is doing to ensure that the economic position of Victorian women improves?

Ms VICTORIA — I thank you very much, because this is certainly something that we are very proud of. I seem to be using that word a lot, but I think it is a great time to be the Minister for Women's Affairs. There has been so much work done in this space, and it is something I plan to very proudly continue on with. You are right; one of the things we are doing is talking about economic participation of women. This is something, I guess, that ties very much into the question Ms Hennessy asked before. There is a strategy that we have put into place. We have allocated \$2.4 million, which is a substantial amount of money, to support the economic participation of women.

We know that increasing women's participation in the workforce is critical to our future prosperity in Victoria. As at February 2013, 58.6 per cent of all women were employed in Victoria, and in comparison 71.4 per cent of men were employed. There is a big gap there we want to make up, so we have put in place a strategy. The low rates of participation, I think, or the reasons for them, are manifold. There are unfortunately still some barriers to women entering the workforce. I am talking here about the paid labour force. Some of these barriers can be that they are primary carers and have huge responsibilities there, whether it be for children or partners or perhaps even for relatives or elderly parents. Sometimes they have inflexible working hours, and that is really unfortunate that we still have that issue. There is an overrepresentation of women in low-paid jobs, unfortunately.

In 2011–12 in the state budget we committed \$2.4 million over four years to improve the economic participation of women in Victoria, and with that money what we are doing is a whole lot of research into how the program should be implemented — so which are the best programs to make sure that we have the best possible outcome. What we are doing is some developmental work that has been happening and determining what the most strategic allocation of those funds is going to be. I have endorsed the women's economic participation strategy, and, as I say, we are looking for the new models that will be able to assist marginalised women into employment, which is incredibly important. We are undertaking research to make sure that we can improve employment and financial security for women, but also to establish partnerships with business and, importantly, communities as to how we promote gender equality in the workforce. Unfortunately that is something we should not be talking about this year; we should be well over this, but we are still talking about it. So we are doing something about it and trying to make changes there.

The partner agencies we are working with are already working in the space; they are currently delivering programs — a lot of employment pathway programs, if you like. But with the new approach we will be able to coordinate the services. It is not just that a woman needs to get the job but also to stay employed, because there is nothing more demoralising them losing a job and then feeling you have been kicked and then not having the self-belief to be able to get up again and go for another job. So for all the reasons that they might lose a job we would like to actually keep them employed. It is better for the economy. The new approach is going to be coordinating all of that type of thing, and we are going to make sure that that support is there after job placement. I think that is probably one of the key issues to all of this.

We are committed to supporting women to establish social enterprises and small businesses. Again, it is incredibly important for those women who feel as though they do not necessarily fit into somewhere else, that they have their own initiative and have ideas they would like to be able to do. So we got a business mentoring program under way, which will connect experienced business mentors with women. That will let them improve or, indeed, if they are only just starting out, establish their businesses. We are also going to have small business training and development. There is going to be a focus on business development, on management and on leadership skills. Again, that comes back to the sorts of investment we are doing across the board there.

There will be integrated packages of training and also support and investment for women who have new social enterprise ideas. But really importantly we are going to evaluate the projects that we have been undertaking so that when we know they are good — or if we know they need tweaking, once we have got them right — we are going to make sure that they can be not just put in through this program but also into mainstream employment service providers. It will start as this fairly small, narrow sector and grow from there and become best practice.

We are going to share our knowledge with other states and also commonwealth government partners to make sure that women continue to have the best possible opportunities. Obviously women continue to be overrepresented in certain vocations and underrepresented in others. We are going to try to expand women's awareness of what some of these roles look like and give a range of employment opportunities to women.

The CHAIR — Minister, could I ask you to come to a conclusion on this one?

Ms VICTORIA — Certainly, Chair; there are so many good things. There are so many things happening in this space — —

The CHAIR — There are, but we are over time on the session.

Ms VICTORIA — I have got to say that we are doing this not only at a state level but also at a national level, and I am proud that at a national level we are looking at having women participate in non-traditional roles which will obviously open more doors for them as well. There is a lot being done in this space, and I am just delighted that we can do this, move forward and hopefully a lot of women will benefit from the work we are doing at the Office of Women's Affairs.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Minister. I believe the deputy has a very quick question.

Mr PAKULA — You can either answer it now or take it on notice. I want the movement in FTE for the Office of Women's Affairs, say for 11–12, 12–13 and 13–14. Have you got it?

Ms VICTORIA — Yes. At the Office of Women's Affairs we have successfully delivered on our commitments surrounding supporting women in economic, social and civic participation — —

The CHAIR — Sorry, Minister, but the question related to full-time positions.

Ms VICTORIA — Absolutely, and staffing is very much part of whether we can do that service delivery. We currently have 15 full-time equivalent staff: 10 staff are substantive and ongoing, and 5 are fixed term. We have obviously had a high level of engagement with a small amount of staff, and I am really proud of what they have managed to do.

Mr PAKULA — I am just after the movement, Minister: what it was and what it is.

Ms VICTORIA — Sure; in November 2011 there were 17 staff within the Office of Women's Policy, and obviously we are all looking at sustainable government. Certainly there has been no decrease in service delivery over that amount of time.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Minister. That concludes this session, and I thank Ms Callister and her senior staff for their attendance this afternoon.

Witnesses withdrew.