

# TRANSCRIPT

## PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

### Budget Estimates 2019–20 (Youth)

Melbourne—Thursday, 13 June 2019

#### Members

Mr Philip Dalidakis—Chair

Mr Richard Riordan—Deputy Chair

Mr Sam Hibbins

Mr Gary Maas

Mr Danny O'Brien

Ms Pauline Richards

Mr Tim Richardson

Ms Ingrid Stitt

Ms Bridget Vallence

**WITNESSES**

Ms Gabrielle Williams, Minister for Youth,

Ms Brigid Monagle, Deputy Secretary, Fairer Victoria, and

Ms Jill McCabe, Office for Youth, Department of Premier and Cabinet.

**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 2019–20 Budget Estimates, in case anyone has been missing the last five days. Its aim is to scrutinise public administration and finance to improve outcomes for the Victorian community, which I am confident we are doing. The committee will now begin consideration of the portfolio of youth. I welcome the Minister for Youth, the Honourable Gabrielle Williams, and officers from the department. Thank you for appearing before the committee today, and may I say you are all looking very youthful.

All evidence given is protected by the Parliamentary Committees Act. This means that it attracts parliamentary privilege and is protected from judicial review. Witnesses found to be giving false or misleading evidence may be in contempt of Parliament and subject to penalty.

Minister, I invite you to make a short or a brief opening statement and/or presentation of no more than 5 minutes. This will be followed by questions from an eminently youthful committee.

**Ms WILLIAMS:** Thank you, Chair, and again thank you to the committee for allowing me to present on youth. I think as we would all be aware, the government plays a really significant role in the lives of young people across many different portfolio areas, whether that be through growing our education and training system, by supporting health and community services, by investing in public transport or of course also by creating jobs. For the last four years I am proud to say that we have been delivering for young Victorians in a very substantial way.

**Visual presentation.**

**Ms WILLIAMS:** Within my portfolio specifically we are ensuring that every young Victorian, no matter their background, is supported to reach their potential. We have achieved this in a number of ways, including by amplifying the voice of Victorian young people in government priority settings and actively involving them in the design of youth-focused services but also on policies and programs through initiatives like our youth engagement policy, Youth Parliament, the Victorian Youth Congress and of course our annual Youth Summit as well. Supporting youth participation in our community has also been a really key priority through activities like FReeZA, Victorian Youth Week and our support for Scouts and Guides. Of course another achievement has been in driving young people's education and economic participation through initiatives like the Engage! program and Advance.

In particular over the last four years our government has started to make additional investments through my portfolio to support young people who experience social and economic disadvantage and who are at greater risk of disengagement, including through place-based initiatives and other targeted initiatives which are culturally sensitive but also community-led, and we know how important that is. These programs have engaged thousands of young people across Victoria and are achieving a range of outcomes such as supporting increased participation in education and training, improvements in health and wellbeing and greater access to volunteering opportunities, traineeships and paid employment.

My objective in this budget was effectively twofold: to deliver on the commitments that we made in the youth portfolio but also to provide targeted support for those young people most in need of our help. There are over a million young Victorians aged between 12 and 24. More than 20 per cent of them live in regional Victoria and around a quarter were born overseas; and over half of Victoria's Aboriginal population are also aged under 25—so significant youth cohorts. We know that these groups can face additional barriers to participating fully in our community and also in our economy, and that is why this budget invests additional funds through my portfolio to provide targeted support to young people from these backgrounds.

First, I would like to turn to our election commitments, firstly around our election commitment in scouting. For those who do not know, scouting has been operating in Victoria for over 110 years—an incredibly old institution—and the Scouts movement has over 600 halls and camp sites across our state. But many of Victoria's scout halls were built in the 1960s and, as you would imagine, after 50-odd years of regular use some of them are requiring significant upgrades and maintenance to ensure that they meet the expectations of modern-day families and communities, and also to ensure that they are effectively safe and accessible. In addition to that, in growth corridors across Melbourne we are seeing a real growth in demand for young people and their families to participate in scouting, with new scout groups popping up and also rapidly outgrowing shared community facilities and meeting rooms. This budget fully funds our commitment to provide \$5.5 million to build new scout halls and upgrade existing scout facilities, including 11 priority projects which were identified by Scouts Victoria and our government ahead of the last election. I am very proud to be keeping our commitments in this area.

I just want to turn to the second point now, which is really around targeting our investment based on need. The target initiatives funded through the portfolio and indeed our budget more broadly have been really welcomed by the youth sector as you see there in the presentation from the quote from the Youth Affairs Council. Our government has committed a further \$1.2 million in 19–20 to continue vital youth programs through four rural offices in Warrnambool, Ballarat, Morwell and Swan Hill. Through the operation of these rural offices the particular needs of young people living in rural Victoria have been identified and new programs and activities have been developed to engage those young people in education and training in their communities, and also of course provide employment opportunities. The programs connect young people to health and community services that they traditionally may not have been able to access. The four regional offices employ 10 youth workers in rural Victoria providing direct support and engagement for hundreds of young people as well as working closely with schools and other service providers to deliver more responsive services to young people across these communities, recognising that the experience for young people in rural and regional communities can be a bit different to their counterparts in metro areas.

There has also been investment of another \$450 000 that has been provided for the Aboriginal youth mentoring program. This program supports mentoring for young Aboriginal people to develop their skills and their connection to their culture and to their community, to build their life skills and enhance their wellbeing and link them to education, training and employment. Five organisations are delivering these bespoke mentoring programs in Melbourne's west, Shepparton, Heywood, Portland, Swan Hill and Bairnsdale. A recent evaluation found that these programs were producing positive outcomes for participants and enjoying high levels of engagement from participants, families and local Aboriginal community leaders as well.

We also recognise that young people in migrant and newly arrived communities face additional barriers to participating fully and equally in our community, so another element of this year's budget which has been welcomed by the youth sector has been our \$6 million package supporting young people from culturally diverse backgrounds. Last year the government funded the establishment of three new community support groups—CSGs, we will call them—which have been working with local South Sudanese communities across Melbourne in Dandenong, Melton and Werribee; so covering Dandenong, Casey, Melton, Brimbank and Wyndham. These groups have worked to prevent youth disengagement and strengthen social cohesion. They were designed in partnership with each of these local communities to provide the necessary supports and interventions for individuals and families, and I am really pleased to report that the take-up of the services that they have been offering has been really encouraging. Hundreds of young people have participated in activities operated by the CSGs, including sport and recreation opportunities, but also homework clubs and family counselling.

I am also pleased to say that this package will extend the La Mana Pasifika project so that it can continue offering support, cultural activities and mentoring for young people in Pacific islander communities. Both of these programs work to build protective factors around vulnerable young people, giving them a sense of identity and belonging that we know is so important and also helping them from being drawn into more antisocial types of behaviour and the consequences that come with such behaviour.

So this budget really does deliver on our promises. It provides disadvantaged young Victorians with the support that they need to thrive, and we are very proud of the fact that we will continue to deliver for young Victorians. I really appreciate the committee's interest in this portfolio area.

**The CHAIR:** We move to the most youthful of members—

**Mr RIORDAN:** No, sorry, Chair, it is not me.

**The CHAIR:** I am happy for us all to state our age for the record if you would like, Deputy Chair, but I believe that Mr Richardson fulfils that purpose unequivocally.

**Mr RICHARDSON:** Minister, I refer you to the youth output of budget paper 3, page 92. Could you please outline for the committee how the Victorian budget this year delivers on the commitments the Andrews Labor government made to young Victorians?

**Ms WILLIAMS:** Thank you, Mr Richardson. Are you still the youngest member of Parliament? Maybe not anymore. You have been usurped, but you were in the class of 2014 so it is appropriate that you be the committee member that asks this question, so thank you very much. It is an important question.

As I outlined in my presentation, the Andrews government has delivered \$5.5 million over four years to build new scout halls and upgrade existing scout facilities across Victoria, just like we said we would. The investment will give more young Victorians the chance to develop their leadership skills but also develop that culture, I suppose, of giving back to the community that we know is very much at the heart of scouting. Scouts Victoria will be matching the government contribution of \$5.5 million by working with community partners which will bring the total investment to build new scout halls and upgrade existing ones to \$11 million over the next four years, so a genuine partnership in that sense. These partners might include community organisations, schools, sporting clubs, philanthropic trusts and different levels of government. Scouts Victoria is also considering which existing facilities may be surplus to their needs, such as in areas where there are high concentrations of scout halls, in order to raise funds for new facilities elsewhere.

Of course as the population has shifted and changed there is a need for scout halls where there did not used to be dense communities, as you can imagine with population growth, and indeed there might be a proliferation of halls in areas which have now shifted in the other direction, so that presents an opportunity for Scouts Victoria. Scouts Victoria has indicated that an \$11 million investment in scout hall refurbishments will create about 160 jobs during construction, including about 80 direct jobs, and a value-added impact of some \$16 million through management of these facilities at no cost to the community. So it is an incredibly exciting, I think, time both for Scouts Victoria but also for the opportunities that we will now be able to provide to communities that may not have had great accessibility to the sorts of programs that scouts has to offer. I know that there are a number of members represented on the committee who represent growth areas, so the idea of being able to boost accessibility to these sorts of programs to young people in their communities will be particularly valuable.

**Mr RICHARDSON:** Well, Minister, I want to jump in a little bit more on scouting. Obviously members would be familiar with the benefit of scouting to our local communities. Minister, could you take the committee through why the Victorian government is investing in scouting?

**Ms WILLIAMS:** Yes, sure. Thanks, Mr Richardson. As you have touched on, scouting brings to young people but also to families many, many benefits. Effectively it provides children and young people between the ages of six and 25 with a range of really, really fun but also challenging opportunities to grow through adventure, effectively—is the philosophy behind it. It is also a youth development program that encourages active citizenship. It also develops skills in young people, the sorts of skills that many programs that we would seek to support as a government would be trying to foster—you know, leadership, teamwork, problem-solving through community involvement, also getting outdoors, which in a time of screens is increasingly hard for parents to do or to inspire, but also experience and skills around working in small teams and learning by doing, which we know is really important to the development of young people.

There are almost 20 000 young Victorians who participate in scouting programs each and every year, and more than a million young Victorians have participated in scouts since 1907. Its membership is on the rise, with last year marking 12 consecutive years of membership growth for Scouts Victoria. So the fact that their

membership is growing, that we know demand for their programs is growing, I think tells us that this is something that we should be investing in. These are opportunities that we should be trying to afford our young people, particularly given so many of the programs too do have a focus on hands-on, outdoor kind of activities, which I know in this day and age many parents kind of lament their children may not be getting access to in the same way that many of us did when we were growing up.

**Mr RICHARDSON:** Minister, something that I am probably taking up on the Chair's behalf as well, but I was wondering if you could reflect on what the package delivers for young people in southern metro, and I know there is particular interest on a particular project?

**Ms WILLIAMS:** Okay, great. Thank you for your question. Yes, there are some exciting plans in that southern metro region, including a \$700 000 investment to support the construction of a new scout hall in Port Melbourne. And our investment will be matched by Scouts Victoria, as I have outlined, to create what is going to be a dedicated \$1.4 million home for the Port Melbourne scout group, which is rapidly outgrowing its current facilities in the community hall that they are currently using.

**The CHAIR:** In a great electorate too, I might add.

**Ms WILLIAMS:** In a great electorate too, absolutely. That particular scout group serves a really growing neighbourhood, which is, I think it is fair to say, in desperate need for more community space, particularly after the rezoning of Fishermans Bend. It basically meant that the need for the provision of parks, schools and other community facilities like scout halls has really grown, so the funding of a new scout hall in Port Melbourne is much needed and I think very, very much welcomed, not only by Scouts Victoria but by all those young people in that community who will be able to benefit from the programs that will be run out of there. It will provide joeys, cubs and scouts in those growing suburbs around Port Melbourne and Fishermans Bend with plenty of space too for their activities, as well as—and I know this is very important to Scouts Victoria—obviously catering for that sort of appropriate storage for all the camping and outdoor activity equipment which amasses through the programs that they run. So it is a great story for that scout group but also for the young people in that region who will get access to those programs now.

**Mr RICHARDSON:** Minister, I want to refer you to the youth output on budget paper 3, page 98. I note the 'Supporting young people' initiative will connect young people from African and Pasifika backgrounds to their communities, to education and to employment. Could you please provide further detail for the committee on what programs this initiative includes—and I know it is probably one to take on notice, unfortunately, with 30 seconds left?

**Ms WILLIAMS:** With 30 seconds left. You are referring in particular to both the South Sudanese and the Pasifika programs. I sort of outlined that in my initial presentation, but this funding will enable three community support groups to continue to support the South Sudanese young people in the three areas I outlined at the beginning of my presentation—in Dandenong, Melton and Werribee. I am very pleased to have one of those in my electorate as well. And the funding obviously also supports the Le Mana Young Pasifika program.

**The CHAIR:** Minister, unfortunately I do have to interrupt, and I get to pass over to the Deputy Chair, which reminds me of that great 1985 film *Cocoon*. Over to you, Deputy Chair.

**Mr RIORDAN:** As I rise out of the pool, Chair.

**The CHAIR:** More youthful than ever before.

**Mr RIORDAN:** More youthful. Minister, I too want to have a little chat, ask some questions, about the Scouts Victoria commitment as a once very active scout myself, and I welcome the fact that fathers and mothers and parents no longer have to build the scout halls. That is probably a great improvement. But Minister, I ask: the budget makes funds available for upgrading and new scout halls. Are there similar commitments, or does the government plan to have similar commitments, for the Girl Guide movement?

**Ms WILLIAMS:** Thank you for your question, Mr Riordan. I am just checking I have got your name correct.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Deputy Chair will make it easier.

**Ms WILLIAMS:** Deputy Chair would probably make it easier, thank you. It might be best to first start with a bit of an explanation around—only briefly, because I have already gone to the value of scouts and why they are such an important movement and—

**Mr RIORDAN:** Yes. The question just simply was: were you looking to match with the girl guides?

**Ms WILLIAMS:** Yes, absolutely. I will get to that, thank you. There is quite a difference in the scale between scouts and guides, so while we do support both organisations, the funding that we are allocating to the scouting movement on this occasion is for the infrastructure projects that we have outlined and in meeting that demand, the challenges as previously described by me, also noting that the scouting movement is somewhat larger than the guides movement. But we also as part of the budget in 17–18 committed \$1 million to Girl Guides Victoria over four years, so that funding obviously will continue—

**Mr RIORDAN:** So there is ongoing funding?

**Ms WILLIAMS:** There is. As a part of that four-year commitment in 17–18 there is funding that goes to support the guides as well.

**Mr RIORDAN:** So there is some funding, okay.

**Ms WILLIAMS:** Absolutely.

**Mr RIORDAN:** Moving on, can you explain how the scout halls listed in the budget were identified for investment by the government, and can you identify which of those will be new? I think we mentioned earlier Port Melbourne is going to be a new build, so how many of the others on the list are new builds?

**Ms WILLIAMS:** Okay, I will divide that question into two parts if you do not mind in terms of how we came to deciding upon the 11 that have been identified so far, and then for those that will be new builds I might pass on to my colleagues to give you more detail on that. But effectively the government worked with Scouts Victoria, who were able to identify the list of priorities as they saw them, and I think from memory they actually circulated quite a broad list of where they felt investment needed to be made in their scout halls to many members of Parliament, if not all of us, prior to the election. So that was something we worked with Scouts Victoria on and took our lead from them about what needed to be prioritised. In terms of the second part of your question, being which of those scout halls are new versus refurbishments, I may refer to my colleague to say a few words about that.

**Ms McCABE:** Thank you, Minister. Yes, so in terms of the 11 scout halls that have already been publicly announced to receive funding, \$650 000 is to build a new Narre Warren South scout hall, there is \$500 000 to build a new 1st Ballan Scouts hall, and there is \$700 000 to build a new Port Melbourne scout hall, as the minister advised. We also have a new scout hall for Epping North—\$600 000 to build a new hall there. The others that have been identified are all upgrades.

**Mr RIORDAN:** Right. So obviously with those sums involved in those suburbs Scouts Victoria is providing the land. These are just sums of money to facilitate a new build; is that correct?

**Ms McCABE:** So there is actually a process by which we are working with Scouts Victoria to plan how these scout halls will actually be built over time, but yes, the funding that has been committed is actually the co-contribution from the government.

**Mr RIORDAN:** So it is a co-contribution.

**Ms McCABE:** Yes. The scouts, as the minister said, it is—

**Mr RIORDAN:** And is there an expectation on those scouting groups to share them as more broadly community facilities, or are they just for the scout troops involved?

**Ms McCABE:** In terms of the discussions that we have had with Scouts Victoria, they have actually talked about the fact that they are really keen to be able to use the new halls in particular and share those with young people, either for child care before school or to make those halls available during school hours where schools might need to have access to facilities. They are also really keen to be able to have the halls used by the broader community, and that is certainly a strong message that Scouts Victoria has provided in terms of our negotiations on this.

**Ms WILLIAMS:** I think it has been a particularly significant part of the conversation as it is related to halls within growth areas as well. I think Scouts Victoria have been very alive to the need for community space more broadly in many of those communities and have been keen to be a part of that solution as well, so credit to them.

**Mr RIORDAN:** Okay. Just changing tack, supporting young people in rural Victoria—of course being from a large rural electorate that always finds it difficult to provide these types of services. I see that there is \$1.2 million that has been targeted for Warrnambool, Morwell, Ballarat and Swan Hill, which are large rural centres—that is true—but of course they are many, many hours from many, many smaller communities whose youth services and what services there are will be provided by a local council or other groups. There is lots of funding for Aboriginal youth, for Pacific islander youth, for all sorts of other youth that identify in a cohort, but are there extra funds or funds available for local communities to provide for the youth in those communities in rural and remote areas?

**Ms WILLIAMS:** I am happy to talk you through a number of the projects that operate in rural and regional communities where funding remains, so that is everything from, say, the Centre for Multicultural Youth Regional Presence Project—

**Mr RIORDAN:** No, so just identifying—general funding for young people that is not tied to a young person that can tick a box. I am talking about marginalised young people who do not identify with a particular group or community but just live in rural and remote areas. Are there funds available for local councils or other groups that would ordinarily provide those services?

**Ms WILLIAMS:** Yes. In an overall sense, to give you a general sense of the funding in youth and where it goes to, which I think might go to your broader point, total investment in grants for youth programs across Victoria, 28 per cent of that is investment in rural and regional Victoria. There is about a 24 per cent investment in metro—to give you that balance—and the remaining 48 per cent of that overall pool of money is going to the programs that are delivered on a statewide basis. So that sort of gives you a sense of what is targeted in rural and regional Victoria and—

**Mr RIORDAN:** But that 28 per cent of the rural is going to those four main towns?

**Ms WILLIAMS:** Well, no, there are a range of other programs that will still operate in other areas of rural and regional Victoria, which is what I was getting to before. So when I started my response I was going to give you a bit of a sense of a range of programs that do go to that broader group of young people that I think you are talking about, so whether that be through programs like FReeZA, Advance, Engage!, through Victorian Youth Week programs, they go to a much broader cohort of young people—

**The CHAIR:** Alas, Minister, you shall now have to finish that by taking the rest of that question on notice. We move to Mr Hibbins.

**Mr HIBBINS:** I am a big believer, as I am sure you are, in young people being decision-makers over matters that affect them. Can you outline how young people have been engaged in the decisions around both the youth portfolio budget and the budget as a whole?

**Ms WILLIAMS:** Can I get you to offer some clarity in terms of in what sense you—

**Mr HIBBINS:** How have young people been engaged in the setting of the youth portfolio budget and the initiatives contained within it, and also how have they been engaged in the decisions around, I guess, the budget as a whole?

**Ms WILLIAMS:** Yes, sure. I mean, I outlined at the beginning that it has been a key priority for us to enhance the youth voice within government policy and decision-making, and I think our youth policy more broadly really does reflect our aim and our commitment to engage more effectively with young people in developing our policies, services and programs. Our youth policy actually includes a youth engagement charter that effectively guides us in how we engage with young people. We have implemented key engagement initiatives across, say, the Victorian Youth Summit, which you may be aware of, and the Victorian Youth Congress. The Victorian Youth Congress is an interesting example because that really gives young people and this group of young people the ability to liaise with their communities and come up with a series of priority areas that they want to look at that they think are of relevance to young people. So, say, last year's cohort—and I am looking at Jill McCabe to confirm my memory on this is correct—we are looking at mental health as a particular area of interest for young people. You might want to reflect on what the priority has been for this group. When I last met with them they were still very much trying to whittle down the areas of focus that they were taking in their work.

Now, to give you an example of how that has influenced us, looking at last year's group and that focus on mental health, their input has had a very significant influence on the government policy direction. We have seen that in part through the announcement of a royal commission into mental health. They put forward some incredibly strong work that talked in particular about the impact of mental illness on young people, recognising that there are particular challenges for young people that exist that are actually quite unique to their age cohort, and that will continue to feed into the royal commission into mental health, for example. So that is one probably quite significant example.

**The CHAIR:** It is indeed, Minister, thank you very much, but your time has now expired. Thank you very much for appearing before the committee today. The committee will follow up on any questions taken on notice in writing, and responses will be required within 10 working days of the committee's request, or we will force you back.

**Witnesses withdrew.**