

TRANSCRIPT

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into budget estimates 2018–19

Melbourne — 30 May 2018

Members

Mr Danny Pearson — Chair

Ms Sue Pennicuik

Mr David Morris — Deputy Chair

Ms Harriet Shing

Mr Steve Dimopoulos

Mr Tim Smith

Mr Danny O'Brien

Ms Vicki Ward

Ms Fiona Patten

Witnesses

Mr John Eren, Minister for Veterans, and

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

The CHAIR — I declare open the public hearings for the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee inquiry into the 2018–19 budget estimates.

All mobile telephones should now be turned to silent.

I would like to welcome the Minister for Veterans, the Honourable John Eren, MP; and Ms Angela Bourke, director, veterans branch, 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. Any comments made outside the hearing, including on social media, are not afforded such privilege.

The committee does not require witnesses to be sworn, but questions must be answered fully, accurately and truthfully. Witnesses 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 by Hansard. You will be provided with proof versions of the transcript for verification as soon as available. Verified transcripts, any PowerPoint presentations and handouts will be placed on the committee's website as soon as possible.

Witness advisers may approach the table during the hearing to provide information to the witnesses if requested, by leave of myself. However, 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 person speaking. Any filming and recording must cease immediately at the completion of the hearing.

I 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 EREN — Thank you, Chair. I am pleased to have this opportunity to update you on the veterans portfolio. Regarding 2015–16 election commitments, in 2014 we made a number of commitments to commemorate veterans' services and sacrifices, and support their health and wellbeing, which includes \$1 million to fund programs and activities to mark the 50th anniversary of the Battle of Long Tan, \$400 000 over four years to the RSL to provide welfare to veterans and \$1.2 million over four years to extend free public transport to all TPI and EDA ex-service personnel. I am pleased to say that all three commitments have been implemented.

We estimate that up to 25 000 people were engaged in the commemorative program for the 50th anniversary of the Battle of Long Tan and the Vietnam War, which included activities such as graveside vigils across the state and the country's largest Vietnam Veterans Day commemoration held at the shrine.

In May 2017 I had the pleasure of launching RSL Active, funded by a \$400 000 welfare commitment. RSL Active is designed to deliver a range of activities for younger veterans to create and develop social networks, enhance support circles and improve mental and physical health outcomes. In 2017 alone, 256 veterans and partners participated in RSL Active.

We have implemented the government's commitment to extend free travel to all TPI and EDA ex-service personnel, removing the eligibility requirement for a recipient to have served overseas at war or in peacekeeping operations. Since July 2015, 265 TPI-EDA travel passes have been issued.

The 2018–19 budget will provide \$12.9 million in funding to support veterans, including \$5.6 million to provide ADF personnel with better access to Victorian residential stamp duty concessions by recognising the operational requirements of service roles and exempting them from the requirement of needing to occupy their homes for 12 months. This builds on the exemption delivered in the 2017–18 budget for ADF personnel regarding the first home owner's grant.

The public sector veterans employment strategy is fantastic. In the 2017–18 budget we committed \$900 000 over four years to provide assistance to 250 veterans to find jobs in the Victorian public sector. In the Victorian budget 18–19 we built on that commitment by allocating a further \$344 000 for the major projects veterans employment initiative that will assist with placing veterans into work across some of Victoria’s biggest public infrastructure projects.

Regarding our public transport concessions, there is 2.76 million over four years to expand current free public transport travel arrangements for veterans, war widows, school students, ADF cadets, scouts and girl guides to include Remembrance Day and Vietnam Veterans Day, and of course free public transport during Veterans Health Week.

Other initiatives — I will not go through all of them — are extensive. I do want to mention the Shrine of Remembrance. Obviously the Shrine of Remembrance continues its important role as a place of commemoration, education and reflection. For the last two years the shrine has welcomed over 1 million visitors and was named the fifth best attraction in Australia in the TripAdvisor Travellers Choice Awards in May 2018.

On the Anzac Day centenary, the government of course continues to support a range of Anzac centenary projects through grant programs which assist communities make their own connections and tell their own stories. To date a total of almost \$3.1 million has been allocated to Anzac centenary-related grant projects. Due to popular demand, *Victoria’s Journey of Remembrance*, a production for secondary schools, has been extended to November 2018, as has *Messenger Dogs — Tales of WWI*, designed for primary school students. The *Journey of Remembrance 2* is now underway, a refreshed and updated version of the first roadshow, this time involving young veterans in the performance cast. Over 95 000 primary and secondary students across Victoria have engaged with the performances.

On Anzac Day, this year approximately 35 000 people attended the Anzac Day dawn service at the Shrine, and the government currently provides \$80 000 annually to the RSL to help support the delivery of Anzac Day activities. A further \$18 000 was provided for approximately 5000 students to attend Legacy Anzac Day commemorations for students at the Shrine.

The Premier’s Spirit of Anzac Prize continues to be popular for students. Of course in April this year the recipients travelled again to Darwin and Singapore, and highlights included a visit to the Darwin Military Museum and a behind-the-scenes experience with the 1st Brigade at Robertson Barracks in Darwin. Students also participated in wreath-laying ceremonies at Kranji War Memorial led by our two veterans representatives. Since its inception in 2004 we have received over 2710 student entries from across Victoria and provided 305 Victorian students with the opportunity to participate in either the overseas or Canberra study tour.

Mr D. O’BRIEN — Sorry, could I just get clarification. Minister, did you say \$8000 to the RSL or \$80 000 — I just did not quite hear — for the Anzac Day services?

Mr EREN — Eighty thousand — eight zero.

Mr D. O’BRIEN — Thank you.

Ms SHING — Minister, I would like to talk a little further about the veterans employment strategy and the references that you made to that in your presentation. This has been something that has been allocated since 17–18 and now again in 18–19, with an additional \$344 000 on top of the 900 000 that was committed initially. What I would like to do is to get a better understanding of why the outcomes are higher for 17–18 than expected and why it is that we are now looking to move from 50 applicants to the public sector in the 17–18 target up to 1500. The 18–19 BP3 target has actually been revised to 500 applicants. Can you just talk us through what the factors are that underpin this?

Mr EREN — Sure, absolutely. Look, what we have found out is that there is a lot of skill in the returned service men and women who come back from service, and we want to be the attractive state to accommodate these service men and women. I am proud to say that it was a Victorian of course who first introduced the portfolio of veterans — Premier Bracks introduced it — and of course we want to ensure that we get our share of those returned service men and women that would like to be located in Victoria. So the incentive is of course, like with many other incentives that we have, that it is a first in relation to the amount of jobs that we are

providing. When you consider 250 public sector jobs, initially we thought that there might be a few applying for it, but that has well exceeded the numbers of people that actually are wanting to work in Victoria.

Ms SHING — Is it intended that you will continue to track the number of veterans applying for positions in the VPS throughout this reporting period?

Mr EREN — Yes, we intend to track all of those veterans that make the applications. Veterans in Construction is another example. The biggest level crossing removal project in the nation, for example. Not only did they go overseas and protect us and protect our democracy, but they came back and now they are protecting road users from trains versus cars, and they are constructing along with a number of veterans those very important projects that are removing level crossings. So when you consider Veterans in Construction and now the public sector jobs that we have made on offer to attract veterans to come and live here, I think it is important that we acknowledge the fact that we lead the way in the sense that veterans have a lot more incentives to come to Victoria and live in Victoria because of what we are making as an opportunity for them.

Ms SHING — So in the context of the work on Veterans in Construction, I saw a video clip which indicated that one veteran was, to paraphrase him, particularly pleased at the structure that he found within the construction environment and that that was assisting him as part of his transition back into civilian life. This is one of the areas which consistently comes to the fore in managing the transition for people from working in the theatre of war or on peacekeeping missions to coming back into civilian life, and almost never having had the support that they need or that they deserve and often with very, very difficult psychological, social and economic consequences for them. What is the framework at a state level? I know that we have the interface between the state and the federal governments around who has responsibility for what, but what is the state able to do to better assist with transition to the extent that we can within the carve-out of Victorian responsibilities and funding not just to assist with transition but to manage post-traumatic stress, to provide a pathway for veterans and also to provide that ongoing engagement — that might be through RSLs, it might be through on-the-ground engagement or through commemorative activities — that enables them to continue to see a pathway?

Mr EREN — All of the above. As I have indicated, when we have ministers for veterans meetings nationally — and Darren Chester is the new federal minister — we are commended in terms of the services that we provide for our veterans. One of those things that they were really interested in was the accommodation of veterans who are doing it tough. The Richmond project is one of those projects that obviously is such an important part of it. It is about housing them to a certain extent for those that would like to be housed, it is about finding employment opportunities for them and it is about directing them. The hard part about veterans is that they are hard to track. Once they come back they are really hard to track. The ex-service organisations help us a lot when it comes to veterans — contemporary veterans, the younger veterans — because it is hard to track them. And one of the ways that we do that is through mental health services that we are linking in with the federal government, because they have made a large amount of money available to help those veterans that come back that are psychologically damaged.

Ms SHING — On that point, there are so many organisations across the board, again at a state level or at a federal level or a combination of the two, which gather data and which try to provide as much support and outreach at a local level as possible, but the RSLs strike me as one of the fundamental ways that support and assistance can be provided to veterans. There is a reference in the budget, and also that you mentioned in your presentation, of \$2.242 million over two years to fund improvements and enhancements to ex-service organisation facilities. What is built into this funding, if anything, in relation to the community-based RSLs and those really localised services that really do want to help but often do not necessarily have the resources to do it? And Ms Bourke, I am very happy to throw to you in the event that you would like to add any extra detail.

Mr EREN — Yes, that money is specifically to enhance the ex-service organisations and to make critical improvements to the services that they provide and to help where we can in terms of the facilities that they operate out of. It is also supporting training and/or information sessions for ex-service organisations to get the best out of the services that they can provide to those veterans. So from our perspective it is making sure that we liaise with the many ex-service organisations, and the RSL is clearly the largest of the ex-service organisations. Dr Robert Webster, of course, we have very close contact with as a government, and also David McLachlan — even though he has stepped aside in terms of that role, he still continues to help with the employment program.

Ms SHING — And with younger veterans as well, again RSLs tend to cater to a specific age bracket simply because of their familiarity and the branding that they have within communities. How are we accommodating younger veterans? We are seeing veterans returning to civilian life younger and younger, and this is something which then leads to a number of cascading consequences that obviously need to be addressed with support and with assistance as well. So to the extent that you can, within the time that we have available, if you could talk to that, that would be great — again in the context of the PTS issue and again noting that veteran suicide continues to be a very real tragedy and a very real consequence of that absence of support and assistance in the transition to civilian life.

Mr EREN — One of those programs, as I have indicated in my presentation, is RSL Active. We have provided money to the RSL. Actually there were a couple of veterans that I met when we made this announcement with Dr Robert Webster out my way in Geelong, out at Torquay. Surfing is a key way to get people out of their homes, and most of them have pets, for example, as companions. One veteran that I spoke to at that event had not been out of the house for two months.

Ms SHING — All too common.

Mr EREN — Very common. So this is a way of helping those veterans with some of the issues they have psychologically, and this program is going a long way to helping those veterans.

Ms SHING — If you could provide on notice a range of examples of the outreach that is provided across activities and allocations, Minister, that would be really helpful.

Mr EREN — Sure.

Mr D. O'BRIEN — Minister, can I just continue on that issue of the veterans employment strategy, and I think that figure of 1500 applying is fantastic, and it is great that there is that much interest. Can I ask, though, how many veterans have actually been employed under that program?

Mr EREN — Sure. I think, just off the top of my head, about 108 so far.

Mr D. O'BRIEN — Off the top of your head, 108 — okay.

Mr EREN — But I just need to make sure that that number is correct. Yes, 108 veterans have been employed.

Mr D. O'BRIEN — And what is the target for 18–19?

Mr EREN — So 17–18 inclusive is 108.

Mr D. O'BRIEN — Sorry, do you have an actual target? I know it is 250 overall, so that is over the four years.

Mr EREN — Yes, overall.

Mr D. O'BRIEN — So is there a target for —

Mr EREN — The good part about this, Danny, is that we have got lots of applicants. It is about finding their skill set and it is about identifying where they would be best suited to work — in which environment. So the fact that we have got 108 veterans working already is a fantastic effort. We are almost halfway there. This was a four-year program as you can appreciate. We did not expect that there would be this rapid employment of veterans. Clearly they are making application: there are 1500 applications. We are sifting through that, finding the skill sets, what further training they may need, which sectors that they belong in and which sectors they could work in.

Mr D. O'BRIEN — On that point, could I perhaps take on notice the areas that they have gone into — so what sections of the public service they have actually gone into?

Mr EREN — Sorry, say that again.

Mr D. O'BRIEN — Could I just get on notice what areas they have gone into in the public service?

Mr EREN — Sure. I can tell you that 91 of them are sworn recruits for Victoria Police —

Mr D. O'BRIEN — Right, okay. That is the bulk of them, then.

Mr EREN — which for a lot of them, coming from the military, they would probably think that would best suit them in terms of their skill sets as well. I mean, this is about finding out what their skill sets are and finding out where they want to actually work. You cannot force anyone to work in an industry they do not want to work in, so this is what it is about.

Mr D. O'BRIEN — That is great.

Mr EREN — And we will work with them over the next four years.

Mr D. O'BRIEN — Minister, you know there are works obviously on the Metro Tunnel on Swanston Street that are having an impact on many activities in the city. Will those works force, say, a rerouting of the Anzac Day parade for 2019 or over the future years or any other disruptions to the parade?

Mr EREN — Look, not as far as I am aware. Obviously it is not going to be business as usual for the surrounding area in terms of some of the impacts it will have. But we have worked with the metro rail authority and with the Shrine itself in terms of the impact being kept to a minimum. So far with the discussions that we have had as a government both with the Shrine and metro — and metro rail want to do the absolute right thing; they do not want to disrupt any of the services at the Shrine or indeed veterans, where possible of course. They want to try to make it minimal at best. The Shrine at this point in time do not have any real concern. It has a very low impact on the Shrine in terms of what is going on around them. For what it is worth, one of the stations is going to be very handy. Anzac station is obviously one that is going to be very handy for those people that want to take public transport to visit their favourite location, which is the Shrine.

Mr D. O'BRIEN — You referred to the major projects work, 344 000 in addition to the public sector program. Where is that in the budget? Is that included in the Victorian veterans line item on page 102?

Mr EREN — It will be under the veterans employment initiative. It will be added onto that 900 000 that we initially allocated for it.

Mr D. O'BRIEN — I just want to clarify, though, because —

Mr EREN — Sure. If you could just bear with us for a second.

Mr D. O'BRIEN — So page 102 has the line item for output initiatives. I was also going to ask what else is in that line item.

Mr EREN — Page 102.

Mr D. O'BRIEN — BP3.

Mr EREN — Yes, it will be added to that line item.

Mr D. O'BRIEN — Okay. Can I just ask another one? You mentioned some of the grants programs. I have had contact from a couple of the RSLs that have applied for funding, in particular under the Victoria Remembers Major Grant Program. They were told, I believe, that successful applicants would be advised by Anzac Day whether they were successful or not, but they are still waiting. Can you advise if there has been any delay, perhaps as a question on notice, if you could —

Mr EREN — Danny, we can have a look at it and see where it is at, and we can get back to you on that.

Mr D. O'BRIEN — The issue of course is some of them are for wanting to do upgrades in time from Remembrance Day, and they want to get work cracking.

Mr EREN — Sure.

Mr D. O'BRIEN — You are not aware of any delays?

Mr EREN — I am not aware. I mean, there would be lots of applications. I would not be aware of every single one of them.

Mr D. O'BRIEN — Just back on supporting Victoria's veterans, could you perhaps run through, in addition to the major projects program, what else the \$1.8 million in this year's budget is allocated towards?

Mr EREN — This is a four-year program. We want to make sure that we make veterans feel comfortable in Victoria, find a job, have accommodation and have the services that they need to make sure that they fit back into civilian society. I have got to say that it is record amount of money that we are putting into veterans because of the importance of this portfolio. This is a program which is designed to make sure that veterans make full use of this skill set, whether it is in the construction area, whether it is joining the police force or whether it is being a public servant, and it is about identifying their skill sets. That is what we are trying —

Mr D. O'BRIEN — Sorry, I might not have not made myself clear, Minister. What I was actually asking is if you look again at BP3, page 15, supporting Victoria's veterans, it says funding will be provided to implement the government's response to the Victorian veterans sector study report. I understand the money for the major projects work is included in that, but I just wanted to get a breakdown of what else is included in the \$1.8 million that is allocated on that line item.

Mr EREN — The \$1.85 million over four years is to build the capacity and capability of ex-service organisations and to raise awareness of the contributions of the veterans in our communities to develop a data snapshot. That is what we were talking about earlier. It is really hard to capture and have real hard data on where the veterans are in their activities and where they work, where they live and where they go. Social media, I have got to say, is an outlet for finding where they are. A lot of the ex-service organisations now are concentrating on their Facebook pages. In that way they can highlight through their page the services they provide, and they make contact through that way. So it is about trying to capture that data.

Mr D. O'BRIEN — Just on that, and you were talking about it with Ms Shing before — and this is not a criticism; I am just asking a question — do we know how many veterans are homeless and, for example, what proportion of homeless people living rough on the streets in the CBD are ex-veterans?

Mr EREN — That is really hard data to get hold of. I do know there are a number of organisations that are trying to help those veterans that are living on the streets. Some of them head bush. They just get a two-man tent and they do not want population. They want to get away from hustle and bustle. They do not want a home. What they want to do is go somewhere bush.

The CHAIR — Order! I would like to thank the witnesses for their attendance.

Mr EREN — I wish I had more time to answer that.

The CHAIR — Sorry, Ms Shing, if you would like to read into Hansard Ms Patten's questions. Apologies for that.

Ms SHING — I have just got some questions on behalf of Ms Patten, who is not here. Question 1: budget paper 3, page 104, mentions the creation of a veterans major project employment initiative. A, is this initiative in the extension of the Major Projects Skills Guarantee, or likely to be a completely separate initiative? B, what links, if any, will there be between this initiative and the Prime Minister's veterans employment initiative, administered federally through the Department of Veterans' Affairs? C — you can take all of this on notice by the way; I am just reading it into the record — page 53 of the Victorian Veterans Council *Veterans Sector Study Report 2015*, on the topic of employment for veterans, states that there is a 'lack of available Australian data on this topic', relying as it does on the data from the United States to discuss the issue of employment after a military career. How is the need for this initiative assessed, and what veteran employment targets relative to the rest of the population will be set for this initiative? How will we know if and when those targets are met?

Question 2: budget paper 3, page 104, also mentions a four-year program for the provision of free public transport for veterans and other groups attending veterans-related events. Is that likely to be a refund-type model for public transport fares or will these groups carry some kind of identification on given days which will grant them free public transport? And the final question, question 3: budget paper 3, page 299, shows a funding boost for support to veterans in Victoria of nearly 30 per cent relative to last year's budget total. Is this funding boost

mostly due to timing around World War I centenary commemorations or are there other reasons for the timing of this funding boost? What outcome will result from this increase in funding?

Mr D. O'BRIEN — On indulgence, I just wanted to make a point about the questions we were asking too. I think it is important that we all recognise that not every veteran has PTSD or mental health issues. Whilst they are very critical issues we need to work on, in terms of employment it is important that as a government we send a message to the private sector as well that they are actually really valuable employees.

Mr EREN — Absolutely.

Mr D. O'BRIEN — I know we were focusing on those with problems, but we should acknowledge that they are not all in that situation.

Mr EREN — Just on the homeless side of it, I have got some information here. Between 0.3 and 0.4 of the homeless population are veterans, so it is not a big, large amount.

Mr D. O'BRIEN — In Victoria.

Mr EREN — In Victoria.

The CHAIR — I would like to thank the witnesses for their attendance: the Minister for Veterans, the Honourable John Eren, MP; and Ms Bourke, director of the veterans branch. The committee will follow up on any questions taken on notice in writing. The response answering the questions in full should be provided in writing within 10 working days of the committee's request.

Committee adjourned.