

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the 2023–24 Budget Estimates

Melbourne – Wednesday 14 June 2023

MEMBERS

Sarah Connolly – Chair

Nicholas McGowan – Deputy Chair

Michael Galea

Paul Hamer

Mathew Hilakari

Lauren Kathage

Bev McArthur

Danny O’Brien

Ellen Sandell

WITNESSES

Ms Natalie Suleyman MP, Minister for Veterans,

Ms Louise Perry, Deputy Secretary, Fairer Victoria, Engagement and Coordination,

Mr Anthony Plummer, Executive Director, Veterans and Youth, Fairer Victoria, Engagement and Coordination, and

Mr Aaron Coutts, Director, Veterans, Department of Families, Fairness and Housing.

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

I ask that mobile telephones now please be turned to silent.

On behalf of the Parliament, the committee is conducting this Inquiry into the 2023–24 Budget Estimates. The committee's aim is to scrutinise public administration and finance to improve outcomes for the Victorian community.

I advise that all evidence taken by the committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. However, comments repeated outside this hearing may not be protected by this privilege.

As Chair I expect that committee members will be respectful towards witnesses, the Victorian community joining the hearing via the live stream this afternoon and other committee members.

Witnesses will be provided with a proof version of the transcript to check. Verified transcripts, presentations and handouts will be placed on the committee's website.

I welcome the Minister for Veterans the Honourable Natalie Suleyman and officers from the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing. Welcome to you all. Minister, I am going to invite you to make a short opening statement or presentation of no more than 5 minutes before we kick off with questions from the committee.

Visual presentation.

Natalie SULEYMAN: Thank you, Chair and committee members, for the opportunity to present the veterans portfolio and highlight our government's investments through the 2023–24 state budget. Can I begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we are meeting today and pay my respects to their elders both past and present. I would also like to acknowledge and thank our veterans and families for their service and sacrifice.

The veterans portfolio is dedicated to enhancing the wellbeing of veterans and their families, emphasising and commemorating their service and ensuring that the Victorian veterans receive the necessary support, resources and connections they require. Our efforts have exceeded targets with a significant milestone of 1210 veterans successfully employed in the public sector through the public sector veteran employment strategy. We have actively engaged with the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide, sharing valuable insights on supporting veterans in Victoria and addressing the needs of our veteran community.

Through the Anzac Day Proceeds Fund the portfolio has also allocated \$800,000 to 22 projects aimed at enhancing the wellbeing of our veterans and their families. Additionally, we have provided grants totalling \$1.6 million to support 71 projects that commemorate, facilitate and educate Victorians about veterans' contributions and service.

Our annual investment in the portfolio has more than doubled since 2020–21. This year's budget demonstrates the government's commitment to recognising and supporting Victorian veterans with a substantial investment of \$41.6 million. Of this, more than \$36 million has been allocated to the creation of the new Veterans Card Victoria. This card would provide discounts and benefits to all Victorian veterans starting 1 July this year in recognition of their service. The Veterans Card Victoria will be accessible to anyone who has served or is currently serving in the Australian Defence Force and resides in Victoria. This will be an Australian first, with

the card for all veterans. This will be available to over 60,000 veterans who live in Victoria but are currently not connected to any veteran concession or ex-service organisation.

Furthermore, the 2023–24 state budget allocates funding for Türkiye centenary celebrations with the Spirit of Anzac Prize trip to Gallipoli. This exciting program will soon be open to Victorian students to apply to join the delegations to travel to Gallipoli, and I know that a number of schools have already expressed interest. The state budget has also allocated funding for important infrastructure upgrades for the Newport RSL. The 2023–24 budget will enable the continued implementation of the Restoring Community War Memorials and Avenues of Honour grant program, ensuring the preservation of local and state community memorial assets.

Furthermore, funding will be provided to the Shrine of Remembrance to continue to host the weekly last post and the Remembrance Day services, which are important traditions commemorating the service and dedication of our veterans. I am immensely proud that our government remains steadfast in recognising and supporting Victorian veterans, expressing our deep gratitude for their selfless dedication to our state and nation. I look forward to continuing the work with all stakeholders on improving outcomes for veterans right across Victoria.

In closing, I would extend my heartfelt appreciation to all veterans for their remarkable service to country, as well as all organisations with their veterans sector, large or small, for making great efforts and working hard in the past 12 months to support Victorian veterans and their families. I thank again the committee for your valuable interest in and support for this portfolio.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. We are going to go to Mr O'Brien for the next 8 minutes.

Danny O'BRIEN: Thank you, Chair. First question is: are you going to Türkiye, Minister? Sorry, that is just a lighthearted question; I am not trying to pin you on something.

Natalie SULEYMAN: I think what is important at the moment is promoting the program to all Victorian schools and really generating excitement amongst our students, because for a very long time –

Danny O'BRIEN: I just assumed the answer would be yes. Sorry, I was not trying to be smart.

Natalie SULEYMAN: I have not determined that.

Danny O'BRIEN: Okay.

Natalie SULEYMAN: I think the first priority for us is to make sure that students are engaged and applying for this program.

Danny O'BRIEN: Okay.

Natalie SULEYMAN: It is fantastic. The spirit of Anzac program gives an opportunity for students to not only travel to Gallipoli but also share stories. I have been to Gallipoli a number of times of course.

Danny O'BRIEN: I know; you have been with the shadow minister. Anyway, I appreciate that answer. I was just being a little bit flippant, but I will go on to actual questions. You mentioned the veterans card, Minister, and there is funding there on page 40 for the veterans card among other things. When you take out the new initiatives funding this year – so \$11.7 million for 2023–24 – and compare that to the budget for the whole output this year of \$23.6 million, which is on page 174, when you remove that, what is left over after the veterans card is \$11.9 million. Given that the revised output for 2022–23 was \$17.9 million, basically there is a shortfall of \$6 million. Sorry, that is complicated. But in essence, when you take out the veterans card funding this year, there is a \$6 million shortfall on what was spent in 2022–23. What is being removed or cut from that?

Natalie SULEYMAN: Sorry, Mr O'Brien, I will not be a moment. Mr O'Brien, I think you are referring to the shortfall being the Vietnam veterans museum. Some of the committee members would be aware that VCAT has made a decision to reject the application for the development of the Vietnam veterans museum at Phillip Island.

Danny O'BRIEN: Sorry, we might be at cross purposes here. The revised figure on page 174 says there is \$17.9 million being spent for the output for veterans this year. If you take out the veterans card, there is

basically \$6 million less than that forecast for 2023–24. So the question is: what is being reduced? What is not being spent next year?

Natalie SULEYMAN: Again, Mr O'Brien, I do take you back to what I began with, and that is the Vietnam veterans museum at Phillip Island and the fact that VCAT has made a decision at the moment. We are working with the affected stakeholders.

Danny O'BRIEN: You will need to bear with me, Minister. What has that got to do with the reduction? Does it mean that there is funding that was spent last year that is not being spent now?

Natalie SULEYMAN: 2023–24 we had \$23.6 million.

Danny O'BRIEN: Correct, but that includes the new veterans card, so what I am asking is: when you take out that, which is \$11.7 million in the budget, you end up with \$6 million less than what is currently being spent.

Natalie SULEYMAN: I would ask Anthony –

Danny O'BRIEN: Mr Plummer might be able to enlighten me.

Natalie SULEYMAN: to go into the details of the brief.

Anthony PLUMMER: Certainly.

Danny O'BRIEN: I am sorry. It is complicated.

Anthony PLUMMER: No, no. Thank you for the question, Mr O'Brien. So the National Vietnam Veterans Museum, as the minister has said, is part of that differential between the \$11.5 million and the \$23.6 million, as is the base funding for the Shrine of Remembrance that will continue next year and the –

Danny O'BRIEN: So I am clear, there is funding, when, for the Vietnam veterans centre? It was in last year's.

Anthony PLUMMER: So that was in the budget papers. It was slated for this coming financial year.

Danny O'BRIEN: Right. And it is not going ahead because of VCAT action.

Anthony PLUMMER: No.

Danny O'BRIEN: So that is why there is at least a \$6 million reduction in the total output.

Anthony PLUMMER: Well, a deferred output.

Danny O'BRIEN: And what was the other – you said something about the shrine?

Anthony PLUMMER: There is also funding in the portfolio for the Shrine of Remembrance and the Mount Macedon memorial cross, which as you may recall was announced in the lead-up to the election, that is included in the higher \$23 million figure.

Danny O'BRIEN: So they are going ahead.

Anthony PLUMMER: The Mount Macedon memorial cross is.

Danny O'BRIEN: Yes. But Vietnam veterans is not. How much was that?

Anthony PLUMMER: So the Vietnam veterans was \$10 million over two years.

Danny O'BRIEN: Yes. Okay. So it is \$5 million a year.

Natalie SULEYMAN: Correct.

Danny O'BRIEN: 2023–24, 2024–25? Okay. I think I have got that quite clear. But also, Minister, the Spirit of Anzac award did not go ahead last year I think due to COVID. Again I am seeing where the funding is actually going this year, given that again, once you take out the veterans card, which is a good initiative, there is actually less money than is being spent even when you account for the Vietnam veterans money not going ahead. How much is the Spirit of Anzac, and how much impact does that have on the budget?

Natalie SULEYMAN: Thank you, Mr O'Brien, for that question. And as noted the Premier's Spirit Of Anzac Prize in previous years did not go ahead due to COVID and travel restrictions, but the Victorian government has committed to delivering this competition again. And we believe in 2023 we will ensure all schools and students are given –

Danny O'BRIEN: I am going to run out of time, Minister. Can I just ask how much money it is?

Natalie SULEYMAN: You know, we do need ample time and notice for schools to be able to receive that notice and be able to apply for it, but can I say that the SOAP program was provided \$800,000 over four years in this year's budget, and this is something that we are really pleased to be commencing again.

Danny O'BRIEN: \$800,000 over four years.

Natalie SULEYMAN: That is right. And this will –

Danny O'BRIEN: Okay. Thank you. I have got one more question if I could before my time runs out. Minister, you will be aware, I am sure, of an article in the *Herald Sun* about the Boroondara RSL sub-branch being leased to the Boroondara council for \$1 when it is a \$10 million site. I appreciate this is not directly yours, but are you concerned about how the RSL is managing its funds as the Minister for Veterans?

Natalie SULEYMAN: Sorry, whereabouts is this? What page are you referring to?

The CHAIR: You are referring to the *Herald Sun*, an article.

Danny O'BRIEN: I am referring to a *Herald Sun* article. If you want a budget paper reference, budget paper 3, page 48, where you are actually funding another RSL sub-branch. And the question I have got is: is this a good outcome, that an existing plot of land owned by the RSL is being leased out for \$1 a year?

The CHAIR: Apologies, Mr O'Brien. Your time is up.

Danny O'BRIEN: Saved by the bell.

The CHAIR: We are going to go to Mr Hilakari for the next 11 minutes.

Mathew HILAKARI: Thank you, Minister, and thank you, officials, for attending this afternoon. I really appreciated your presentation, Minister, which demonstrated the budget has gone from \$8.4 million in 2014–15 to \$23.6 million in 2023–24, and as has been alluded to – and I will take you to budget paper 3, page 40, 'Support to veterans in Victoria' – we have introduced a Victorian veterans card, and I am just hoping you can outline some of how that will benefit the veterans community.

Natalie SULEYMAN: I thank you very much for that question, Mr Hilakari. This gives me the opportunity to again highlight the investment for veterans and families in Victoria. As we know, despite Victoria being home to over 100,000 veterans, more than 60,000 are not connected to any existing concession scheme or to any ex-service men's or women's organisation. That is why this year we are rolling out the veterans card, a nation-leading initiative. This will be a first for Australia. The card's rollout fulfils a core election commitment that was made last November. It recognises the service of all veterans in this state equally, and I think that is really important to note. If you have served for a day or been in multiple deployments, you will be eligible for this card. It is a very small way of saying thank you to our veterans and their families for everything they have sacrificed for Victoria and for our nation. With access to benefits and discounts for cardholders once it is rolled out from 1 July, which is next month, the card will provide cardholders a new concession of \$100 off car rego as well as free public transport on Anzac Day and Remembrance Day, free trailer and caravan registration and of course free fishing and boating licences.

Another important piece to this program is access to the veteran employment pathway. Importantly, for many veterans and their families these benefits will provide much-needed cost-of-living relief, making a real difference in the lives of veterans across our state. With this new initiative we want to make sure that we reach as many veterans across this state as possible. Across the many visits and meetings that I have had in this portfolio, there has been a real enthusiasm from the local RSLs where I have visited and spoken to stakeholders. They are really keen to see on 1 July this card being introduced. We will run a campaign to encourage many, many veterans to sign up to this card, because we know that, as I said, there are 60,000 veterans that are not connected to any form of benefit in our state. We want to be able to change that. Veterans deserve recognition. This is a very small dollar figure. There could be no dollar figure that truly, truly recognises the service and sacrifice of our veterans and their families. This card, as I said, is a small way of recognising everything that veterans have faced. As I said, this is a first for our nation, and we are absolutely forever indebted to our veterans and their families for the service given and sacrifice that they have made not only for this state but of course for this country. As a government we are very proud to be leading the nation by delivering this next month, because we know it is the absolute right thing to do for our veterans and their families.

Mathew HILAKARI: Minister, I might take you now to budget paper 3, page 185, 'Number of veterans employed annually in the Victorian Public Sector'. How will the veterans card actually connect veterans with employment opportunities? That is one of the challenges for cohorts within our community, so I would appreciate any insight.

Natalie SULEYMAN: Thank you, Mr Hilakari, for that question. The Veterans Card Victoria will, importantly, make it easier to connect veterans who have served our nation in a meaningful way to secure jobs. They can continue to make a contribution in the Victorian community, and I think that is really integral, that veterans can make an important contribution in a meaningful way and really transition to civilian life. We know that for our veterans at times it is challenging and difficult to transition into civilian life, and we want to provide the appropriate supports for veterans to be able to make that transition. For many veterans one of the hardest challenges is actually finding stable and secure jobs, and it is absolutely critical.

As I said, veterans have so much to give from their unique skills and the experience that they gain from their period in service in the ADF, and we want to make sure that these veterans get linked up to employment opportunities so that we can continue to have veterans being able to access employment support and opportunity through the veterans employment pathway using this card. The veterans card is not just a concession scheme, because we are also implementing it through the Service Victoria app. This will mean that once registered on the Service Vic app veterans will be able to also receive important information and important updates on support programs from government, and we have been very pleased to actually have that part of Service Vic where we can continue to communicate with our veterans who have registered.

Especially I do want to make a special thanks to the Victorian government veteran employment advocate Major General David McLachlan AO for his incredible work in this space in assisting and really being the bridge, making sure that veterans voices are heard in this space when it comes to employment opportunities. He has been a dedicated advocate for getting more and more veterans into jobs. It is a credit to him, and the program has had an absolute success rate. If I can inform the committee that we have had over 1200 veterans who have been employed in the Victorian public sector since the program began.

Not only are we making sure that veterans get good, secure jobs, but we are making sure that they have the meaningful opportunities which recognise the immense skills and talents of our former service personnel. Just because their service in the ADF has ended does not mean an end to their career. They can make big important contributions to Victoria with the veterans card. We have seen that the veterans employment pathway exactly addresses those concerns.

I had the opportunity at the beginning of the year to attend the Avalon air show with Major General David McLachlan and actually talk to the defence industry and look at partnerships to have more veterans employed in some of those defence industry jobs. It was very positive to hear that already some of our defence industries actually employ veterans because they understand the value of having veterans and the skills that they obtain through the defence force that transition to some of the companies in the defence force.

So this is something that really highlights that we know that having secure employment also supports health and wellbeing, and that is really important as well for veterans. We are continuing to acknowledge that veterans can contribute back in the transition to civilian life and making sure that they are provided with good, secure jobs – whether it is in the industry, whether it is in the public sector or whether it is in the private sector – and as a government this is something that we will continue to administer through the Veterans Card Victoria providing those opportunities.

Mathew HILAKARI: And there are really transferable and really good quality skills, so I am glad you have taken the time to take the committee through that.

Natalie SULEYMAN: Absolutely.

Mathew HILAKARI: In the limited time we have left I would just like to take you to the Anzac prize, and if you could just take the committee through some of the work being done on that – on page 48 of budget paper 3.

Natalie SULEYMAN: Thank you, Mr Hilakari. In the small time that I do have, this is something that as a government we are excited about. This is delivering on our election commitment. The Spirit of Anzac Prize this year is a fantastic opportunity for school communities across Victoria to get involved in learning about Australia's wartime history. I know that there is already excitement. I have received numerous correspondence from schools across Victoria, including school principals and teachers asking how they can incorporate –

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. Apologies to interrupt. We will go to Ms Sandell for the last 3 minutes.

Ellen SANDELL: Thank you, Chair. I have only got 3 minutes, but I want to ask about gambling harm. I know that it cuts across a few different portfolios, but obviously with RSLs so reliant on pokies in a lot of cases and with minimal options for giving up their pokie licences or getting out of pokies, what is the Victorian government doing to reduce gambling harm, particularly to veterans, who we know given that exposure with RSLs could be particularly predisposed to the impact of gambling harm?

Natalie SULEYMAN: Thank you for that question. I will begin by acknowledging that RSL sub-branches do really important work in terms of supporting veterans and their local communities, and I have seen that firsthand through their volunteering work and charity work as well. We know that there are about 270-odd RSL sub-branches across Victoria, and there is a small number of those that have pokie machines. There are many wonderful RSLs, many of which I have, as I have indicated, visited, such as Doncaster, Emerald, Coburg RSL and numerous others that operate on a voluntary basis and have no poker machines. So they really do put their heart and soul into their work –

Ellen SANDELL: Including in my electorate.

Natalie SULEYMAN: In your electorate as well – and you can see that in their passion to provide support, networking opportunities and different activities for veterans and their families. But I do also want to note that we support programs such as RSL Active in this budget, which has \$200,000, and that fund is a continuation of the RSL Active program. The RSL Active program gives veterans the opportunity to stay healthy by reducing social isolation and improving their mental health and wellbeing through a range of social and sporting activities. Part of your question does fall under the responsibility of the casino, gaming and liquor licence minister, but I do want to say that out of the 270-odd RSL sub-branches, volunteers are doing fantastic work each and every day in providing those essential programs and supports and alternative activities, as I have indicated, to veterans and their families. This continues to be something that I am really proud of, because when I do visit clubs like Coburg and like Doncaster, who are really putting their heart and soul into their RSL and are committed to preserving the –

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. Minister and department officials, that is the end of questions for this session. 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 are required within five working days of the committee's request. The committee is now going to take a short break before beginning its consideration of the final portfolio for today, and that is the portfolio for youth. I declare this hearing adjourned.

Witnesses withdrew.