

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

2021–22 Budget Estimates

Melbourne—Wednesday, 16 June 2021

MEMBERS

Ms Lizzie Blandthorn—Chair

Mr Richard Riordan—Deputy Chair

Mr Sam Hibbins

Mr David Limbrick

Mr Gary Maas

Mr James Newbury

Mr Danny O’Brien

Ms Pauline Richards

Mr Tim Richardson

Ms Nina Taylor

WITNESSES

Mr Shaun Leane, MLC, Minister for Local Government,

Mr Simon Phemister, Secretary,

Ms Emily Phillips, Deputy Secretary, Local Government and Suburban Development, and

Mr Colin Morrison, Director, Sector Investment, Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions.

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 2021–22 Budget Estimates. Its aim is to scrutinise public administration and finance to improve outcomes for the Victorian community.

We note that witnesses and members may remove their masks when speaking to the committee but must replace them afterwards.

All mobile telephones and computers should now be turned to silent.

All evidence taken by this committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. Comments repeated outside this hearing may not be protected by this privilege.

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 as soon as possible.

We welcome you, Minister Leane, on this occasion in your portfolio of local government, and we invite you to make a 10-minute opening statement, which will be followed by questions from the committee.

Mr LEANE: Thank you so much, Chair. And thanks to the rest of the committee for having me today to start with the local government portfolio and the budget outcomes, but can I begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we are meeting and pay my respects to their elders past, present and emerging.

Visual presentation.

Mr LEANE: So I am sure you are all aware of the size and complexity of the local government sector and the tremendous work they do in providing more than 100 different services for their communities. Over 126 Acts of Parliament assign responsibilities to councils, and this government works in partnership with councils to achieve shared goals across a range of different portfolios.

Councils employ more than 50 000 Victorians and have a majority female workforce. Council staff have done an amazing job over the last 12 months and beyond that to find ways to connect with vulnerable members of the community, support local businesses and keep delivering on vital services and infrastructure. Those working in the sector do not get nearly enough credit for the work they do to support and deliver for their community. This year councils have spent over \$9.5 billion on services and infrastructure, with around \$3.4 billion in expenditure on capital works.

Through the local government portfolio we support councils and their communities through a number of key funding programs, which I will touch on in the following slides.

This year's budget has funded a number of significant initiatives for local government, including several that directly support councils and their communities in job creation and supporting local economic growth. We continue to support councils in growing communities to build new community facilities and expand on existing facilities with an ongoing commitment to the Growing Suburbs Fund, an extra \$50 million to fund infrastructure such as community centres and hubs, playgrounds, parks and pavilions, all vital assets for growing communities. The Growing Suburbs Fund has a tremendous record in success, with 149 projects now completed and available to the community. It has enabled more than \$900 million of investment and has created 8800 jobs across 253 projects since 2015. Recent investments include \$4.3 million for the Mornington Peninsula shire to deliver a new youth service hub and mental health support centre in Rosebud—this is the

largest single investment provided by the Growing Suburbs Fund to date; \$3.5 million for Moorabool Shire Council to deliver a new early years and community hub in West Maddingley; and \$2 million for the Casey council to deliver a new pavilion at the Pearceedale Recreation Reserve.

We have also committed record levels of funding to support Victorians' public libraries, including an additional \$9.3 million in this year's budget to support a public library resourcing program. This secures additional base funding for public libraries for the next four years, enabling them to plan their services and program delivery with greater certainty. This is also in addition to the record level of investment in the Living Libraries Infrastructure Program, \$10.1 million in 2021–22. I recently had the pleasure of announcing the libraries that will be receiving funding through the latest funding round, including \$800 000 for the Cowes library, which will be part of a new Cowes cultural and community centre, \$67 000 to roll out the second 24/7 library in Mirboo North and \$540 000 to upgrade the Mansfield Library to create a dedicated children's area and study place.

We have also continued to fund the roadside weeds and pest programs: \$11.5 million has been provided in this year's budget to lock in this program for the next four years, providing funding certainty to our councils. This funding will help the 56 rural, regional and outer Melbourne councils with grants of up to \$75 000 to tackle invasive weeds that can impact on farmland and pose a fire risk.

This budget also provides \$1.4 million over two years to a rural roads support package. This new investment will focus on the following 11 rural councils, which spent an average of 32 per cent of their operating budgets on maintaining their extensive road networks: Ararat, Buloke, Gannawarra, Hindmarsh, Loddon, Northern Grampians, Pyrenees, Strathbogie, Towong, West Wimmera and Yarriambiack. This funding will support the development and the adoption of improved asset management systems across these councils. We are also committed to a longer term review of road responsibilities between state and local governments, which includes improving the way councils deliver their road maintenance and construction programs. The terms of reference for this review are under development.

We also have a leadership for women in local government program, which will be delivered by the Gender Equality Advisory Committee, which is led by Juliana Addison and Kat Theophanous. This investment of \$1.8 million over four years will enable more women to build their leadership capabilities and understanding of local government. It will also complement the recent announcement of a review into council culture, which I announced earlier this month. The review will look into the history of the culture of local government and ways to promote more positive and inclusive work environments and ensure fairer and more equal representation of community views. In particular it will consider ways to make local government a more welcoming and safe environment for women, following a Victorian Auditor-General's report that found that more than one in four councillors and council staff had experienced sexual harassment in the past 12 months. The review will be undertaken by a research institute, and the tender is underway as we speak.

Councils have supported their communities through COVID-19 by helping those doing it tough and ensuring that key services and programs are still being delivered. They have done a lot of work on business support and outdoor activation, making it easier for hospitality businesses to expand their outdoor premises to service additional customers. The \$34.5 million local government outdoor eating and entertainment package provides financial support to councils to assist in this. This includes speeding up permit processes, enabling councils to waive permits and paying for infrastructure such as traffic bollards and the creation of outdoor dining spaces. I had the chance to visit the Frankston City Council and see how they have used this funding to transform the Nepean Highway hospitality precinct. Horsham Rural City Council have used their funding to set up three town squares and pop-up parklets for the community and visitors to enjoy. The \$7.8 million for the local government business concierge and hospitality support program was provided to councils to employ more than 230 workers to promote COVID-safe practices through direct engagement with businesses. Councils have used this funding to employ COVID business support officers who will help local hospitality businesses, community venues and small retailers, including hairdressers, butchers and milk bars, with COVID-safe requirements such as QR codes, physical distancing and cleaning. Funding has also been provided to support councils with high numbers of residents from CALD backgrounds to help CALD businesses understand and comply with COVID-safe practices.

I am also delighted that 40 Victorian councils received funding to support 40 women to train and commence new careers as building surveyors, which is currently a skills shortage. This created an opportunity for women

to build a career in construction and help deliver the facilities our thriving local communities need. This is a two-year program, and I am keen to work with councils on opportunities to roll this out again when the program ends and to review whether the model can be applied to other areas faced with skills shortages.

Finally, I just note the 2020 local government elections were the largest elections in Victoria's history. I am pleased to report that these elections were held safely and resulted in a record number of women councillors being elected to office, which resulted in a record number of female mayors being elected by those councils.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. I will pass to the Deputy Chair, Mr Riordan.

Mr RIORDAN: Thanks, Chair. Welcome, Minister and team. Minister, do you oversee the Growing Suburbs Fund?

Mr LEANE: Yes, that is administered by Local Government Victoria, my department.

Mr RIORDAN: Excellent. Good. As a result, then, Minister, \$50 million has been allocated to the Growing Suburbs Fund for the coming year compared with \$75.2 million for 2021, as confirmed by the cuts on page 37 of budget paper 3. Why has there been a \$25 million slash to this funding arrangement?

Mr LEANE: Mr Riordan, I would not describe it as a slash. As you would be well aware, the previous budget was only last November, which is only a bit over half a year ago. We decided in that budget to increase the amount from \$50 million to \$75 million because of a stimulus package, and all portfolios were looking for ways to stimulate the economy coming out of the unfortunate lockdowns because of the global pandemic, which we are all enduring. The good thing about the Growing Suburbs Fund and being able to put that extra \$25 million in as we did in the last budget only recently—

Mr RIORDAN: Was that all expended?

Mr LEANE: is that the Growing Suburbs Fund—I mentioned that there was one round of funding towards the Rosebud youth hub, which is actually quite a big project, and the council is putting quite a bit of money into that. But the good thing about this as a stimulus is Growing Suburbs Fund projects are usually small to medium-size projects. I was out at a project in Casey with Ms Richards and Mr Maas, and that was a project I think that was aiming a few hundred thousand dollars to do great improvement to a community centre in Casey, and those projects are delivered, construction wise, by small and medium local contractors. As a state government we have put a lot of money into big stimulus projects, but we used the Growing Suburbs Fund because it does actually generate stimulus to that smaller end of the Victorian construction sector. Sometimes it is one or two-man companies that get that work and that do that particular work. It is not that it is a cut at all; it is actually that we put \$25 million into the last budget as a stimulus—

Mr RIORDAN: You call it a 'rephasing'.

Mr LEANE: and then you look at how previously to that the Growing Suburbs Fund was \$50 million and then this year it is \$50 million. We are looking forward to these jobs being rolled out, particularly in the growing suburbs where they are really needed, and they do great examples of community—

Mr RIORDAN: So with this significantly reduced amount of money you are spending on growing suburbs, can you tell us the proportion between interface councils and peri-urban councils? What is your split on that?

Mr LEANE: The councils that are able to apply for the Growing Suburbs Fund all put in applications towards whichever particular projects they would like to be supported—

Mr RIORDAN: But can you tell us what the split has been?

Mr LEANE: Well, there is no determined split. It is about each council that is applicable putting up an application for a project. We actually can let you know the different numbers of projects.

Mr RIORDAN: Could we get that on notice?

Mr LEANE: Yes. We are happy to supply that later.

Mr RIORDAN: Great. So there is no guarantee for peri-urban councils, it is on application.

Mr LEANE: That is not what I said. I think that every council is able to apply.

Mr RIORDAN: Well, I specifically asked if there was a designed split. You said there was not.

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan, could you allow the minister to complete.

Mr LEANE: I think the peri-urban councils were actually quite successful in the last round of applications.

Mr RIORDAN: Yes, but you are not allocating—

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan!

Mr LEANE: It is not that we are favouring councils that are not peri-urban. We are just looking at each application, and we are really keen to try and support every council that—

Mr RIORDAN: Yes, but they are not predetermined. It is on an application basis.

Mr LEANE: can put an application into this particular fund.

Mr RIORDAN: Yes. Okay. In round 1—well, we are just finishing up on that. So thank you, Minister.

Mr LEANE: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Ms Richards.

Ms RICHARDS: Thanks, Minister and officials, for your time this afternoon. I am going to pick up on some of the comments you made earlier as part of your presentation and refer you to budget page 3, page 71. \$1.8 million has been allocated to leadership for women in local government. Can you take us through what this funding will be used for?

Mr LEANE: Yes. Thanks for the question. And this is a new initiative. It is part of the suite of measures we are trying to get some culture change in the whole local government sector, and we are really pleased with the outcome of the recent election as far as the gender mix going more towards female councillors. But we have got a goal for the 2024 election that there is parity at least of 50 per cent female councillors and 50 per cent female mayors. We had a good result but we are not there yet, and we have got some work to do.

We have set up a committee, the Gender Equality Advisory Committee, which has representatives from right across the local government sector and some representatives of peak bodies. As I said in the presentation, it is chaired by Juliana Addison and Kat Theophanous, and it is important that in the mix of this committee we did make sure there were representatives of small rurals, regional cities and metropolitan councils as well. And in asking Juliana and Kat, I think Juliana gives us that representation from the regions and our understanding of the regions, and with Kat, she gives us an understanding of the metro councils that she is dealing with. And also in this work of gender equality we know she did some great work with Fiona Richardson. When she was working with Fiona Richardson she did some great work in this area.

So this particular group, we have given them carriage of this program, and the program is there to provide 120 women across Victoria with some opportunities to show some leadership and also some training opportunities, with a view that some of these 120 women over the next two years of this program may consider running for local government in the 2024 election. And they are people that may be already in the local government sector but people from other organisations as well. That is really important. And my view is it is a great thing that they may consider being local government councillors, but the point is that through this program they can take up leadership roles anywhere. And I think it does not have to be councillors, even in the local government sector. As I said before, the clear majority of the 50 000 workers in the local government sector are women, and therefore there is no reason at all—and it does not make sense—that there are not more women in leadership roles in local government. And this is where we are going to do some work around that as well.

I said to Juliana and Kat when we discussed the remit of this committee that there are no limitations on where this committee wants to go. I think they are going to do great work. I mentioned one of the reports recently about sexual harassment in the sector, and I know that probably reflects a lot of sectors unfortunately. It is an area that we want to do some good work in, and I also say that councillors and staff and directors in the sector want us to do that as well. So we have got this opportunity. I think it is a great opportunity. I am really glad we have got this initiative up, and we really look forward to work being done by Juliana and Kat and these women starting their program.

Ms RICHARDS: Thanks, Minister. I would like to maybe unpack that a little bit more. So the Gender Equality Advisory Committee, as you say, with Kat and Juliana was established earlier this year to advise you and Minister Williams. You have said they have been appointed, but I was interested in finding out who else has been appointed to the committee and what they have been tasked to advise you on. That was fast!

The CHAIR: Mr Hibbins.

Mr HIBBINS: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Minister, and your team for appearing today. Two years ago to the day, the government announced that it would be introducing donations laws for local government. Donations would be capped at \$1000 and foreign money banned, and in fact your predecessor said:

We're cleaning up local government by removing dodgy donations with new laws that will be the strictest and most transparent in the country.

What is the status of those laws?

Mr LEANE: Thanks for the question, Mr Hibbins. I think you may have asked me a similar question in the last PAEC, and I understand that you may have some frustration; there has not been a great deal of movement in this area, and I accept that. I think my answer to you at the time was we were hoping for the IBAC report into Casey council to be tabled. There was a reason for that—because in some other jurisdictions in Australia similar types of reports have actually triggered some recommendations about banning certain donations. So I think that may have been helpful on the way forward. I accept about three months ago I thought, 'Well, we don't know when IBAC are going to do their work', so I have asked departmental people to look at drafting and working on a donation reform law—a Bill—because I just feel like we are just getting back to—I do not know when we are going to hear from IBAC on that particular inquiry. So I am hoping that we can have a debate on a piece of legislation early next year.

Mr HIBBINS: Thank you. Minister, I am not sure if you have got oversight, or perhaps this is for the secretary. How many councils accessed the Working for Victoria Fund, and any details around how many councils used it or are still using it? And then also how many people are actually employed by councils through Working for Victoria?

Mr LEANE: I am happy to get you that on notice, if that helps, and get you the exact figures. But I have got to say it has been a great program and hundreds of people have been employed through it via local government. Speaking of local government, I had a conversation with Rural Councils Victoria yesterday, and they have told me they are actually producing their own report on this program, so I am sure they will make that public. But one thing that heartened me is they have gone through statistics—as in a lot of councils have supplied permanent roles in their council for Working for Victoria participants because these people have done great work. It is about stimulus as well and people being employed, but these people have done some great work and councils have acknowledged that there are some really good candidates for future positions. One council told me that, I think, they had about 50, and 23 per cent of them are actually permanent workers at the council now, which is a fantastic thing.

Mr HIBBINS: Given that the funding for Working for Victoria finishes at the end of this financial year, are you concerned that (a) some people are going to now be out of work and (b) that the actual good work that they would be doing, those functions, will not be able to be undertaken by councils?

Mr LEANE: It is a fair question, and I have actually, out of a number of conversations—if there is any way that we can support a similar program, if there is any funding left in that program, then we are really keen to follow that up. I think the idea of the program was that, through no fault of their own, a lot of individuals will have found themselves out of work. And so the Working for Victoria program was initiated, and hopefully as things open up there are more opportunities for employment for those people who took up those positions. I

understand Minister Pulford is still to appear. I would invite you to—it is her program, but I really want to acknowledge her work on this. I think it has just been a fantastic program.

Mr HIBBINS: Thanks, Minister.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Hibbins. Mr O'Brien.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Thank you, Chair. Minister, can I just continue for a moment on the Growing Suburbs Fund. Rounds 1 and 2 this year—79 per cent and 79.5 per cent respectively of that program went to government-held seats and a total of 9 per cent of the entire funding went to one Labor seat, the very marginal Labor seat of Nepean. Given that the other two seats in the Mornington shire did not actually get a cent, how is this not just a blatant pork-barrel from the Labor government?

Mr LEANE: Well, it is not. Which are the other two councils that you said did not get a cent?

Mr D O'BRIEN: The other two seats, Mornington and Hastings, did not get a cent.

Mr NEWBURY: Liberal.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Liberal. Eighty per cent of the funding has gone to Labor seats.

Mr LEANE: Mr O'Brien, we go on the applications of the councils. The councils put in their bids for this fund, and we go on their applications. There is a panel that is divorced from me that decides who will be successful in the funding. So there is—

Mr D O'BRIEN: Do you ultimately approve the funding though?

Mr LEANE: Well, eventually it does come to me, but like I said, there is an independent panel that does this work. I rely on their recommendations as far as the best applicants, and I have a lot of confidence in what they put up to me.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Who is on that panel, Minister? I am happy to take it on notice if you have—

Mr LEANE: Look, I have actually got it here. The panel is chaired by Local Government Victoria, and past panel members from other government departments and agencies have been from Sport and Recreation Victoria, the Victorian School Building Authority, Regional Development Victoria and the Victorian Planning Authority. And if you asked me—

Mr D O'BRIEN: They are all government departments.

Mr LEANE: If you asked me what individuals were nominated, I could not tell you, because I have never actually met them or known who they were.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Hardly independent when they are all government departments. But anyway—

Mr LEANE: I think you are reflecting. I mean, they are not political people. They are not—

Mr D O'BRIEN: No. It is not an independent panel, though.

Mr LEANE: They are not political people; they are departmental people.

Mr D O'BRIEN: I think you need to look up the meaning of 'independent'. Anyway, can I just move on. You talked about in your presentation \$1.4 million over two years for 11 rural councils for a roads package. Given that the country roads and bridges program that your government cut was \$160 million over four years seven years ago, are rural people meant to be thankful for this, which is less than 1 per cent of what they were getting for country roads seven years ago?

Mr LEANE: Mr O'Brien, you are asking for my opinion about whether a group of Victorians should be thankful, and that is not for me to say. What I can say about this program is that this is part of small rural councils, and you know as well as me that small rural councils have a future sustainability issue. We want to work on things that make them sustainable into the future. A lot of these councils are grant reliant for their

budget, federal and state, so we are hoping to work on a process where some of these councils that have 700 metres of local road for each person to maintain—

Mr D O'BRIEN: So \$1.4 million across the state is going to do what?

Mr LEANE: So where we want to go, we want to work with councils around working with identifying. There may a number of roads or kilometres of a road in a council that has a great degree of state significance as far as logistics or tourism or it might even be national significance. So we want to work, and that is why we are doing the work, you know, around what the scope of the review will be, because I think I would give credit to—

Mr D O'BRIEN: Given that significance, Minister, why wouldn't you just give them—

Mr LEANE: the rest of our cabinet to acknowledge—

The CHAIR: Mr O'Brien, could you allow the minister to finish his answer.

Mr LEANE: I am saying give credit to our cabinet to acknowledge that. I do not know if it has been acknowledged before that we need to do a better process when we are working with small rural councils—

Mr D O'BRIEN: Well, we actually need more money for roads, Minister, not better process.

The CHAIR: Mr O'Brien!

Mr LEANE: about, you know, which roads do they believe are of state significance.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr O'Brien. Ms Taylor.

Ms TAYLOR: Yes. Mr Leane and officials, if I could direct you to page 71 of budget paper 3, the roadside weeds and pests program has been allocated \$11.5 mill over four years. Two limbs to the question: what councils are eligible to receive this funding, and why is it so important that councils carry out this work?

Mr LEANE: On the first question, there are 56 rural and regional interface councils that are responsible for managing over 100 000 kilometres of rural roadside—a nice segue from the previous question—and they receive the roadside weeds and pests funding for the program. And the roadside weeds and pests program safeguards Victoria's agriculture sector from significant threats associated with the spread of weeds and pests on council roadsides and also protection to where it abuts public land as well. There is an amazing statistic where weeds cost the Victorian economy over \$900 million a year, which when I came across that I was actually quite put aback by it. Invasive plants and animal species threaten biodiversity and can have serious negative impacts on agriculture, and of course it is a great program to protect the agricultural sector, which supports well over 21 000 agricultural businesses and employs 77 000 people, and of course it is an essential industry to the state. But it is also really important in bushfire prevention preparedness.

So with this funding each council can receive up to \$75 000 to help manage invasive plants and pests along roadsides. There is also a real onus on working in with a number of different entities, and one of those really important entities is Landcare groups. Usually councils will use it to employ someone to oversee this work, so it is really important that they have got someone that is interacting with Landcare groups, community members and of course other neighbouring councils.

The budget, as you said, allocates \$11.5 million over four years. Something that was advocated to us by a number of councils is—this program previously we have not funded for this length of time before, and this is a program that is a very important program—that if we could fund it over a period of four years then it gives them assurance in their future budgeting into coming financial years, so we are very pleased we have been able to do that. It is an important program. It does not get discussed a lot, but given the damage that weeds and pests can do to our agricultural businesses, you know, we are really pleased that we have been able to supply it in this year's budget and actually carry it over for the next four years.

Ms TAYLOR: Yes. And so on that note—and this probably goes without saying—why do councils need to produce a roadside weeds and pest control plan to receive this funding?

Mr LEANE: Look, the plan is important. These plans outlining the green approach to be undertaken by councils to identify weeds and pests to be treated are an invaluable resource for the council, state government, local Landcare groups—who I have mentioned before—Victorian farmers and community members. Councils are required to report on the progress against their roadside weeds and pest control plans and seek variations where required. Councils are also required to undertake community consultation on roadside weeds and pest control plans, particularly with local community and Landcare groups, and make them available to the public. And they have also got to be readily available on their website.

Ms TAYLOR: Okay, sounds good. I might leave it there.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Taylor. Mr Limbrick.

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you, Chair. And thank you, Minister and team, for your presentation and appearing today. One of the interesting things that the government did over the last year was a few I suppose you would call them experiments in deregulating some things. And you know, there were some things around liquor licensing and this sort of thing. And you referred to one of them in your presentation, the outdoor dining, and I was wondering what the long-term plan is for that. Because although I can see lots of benefits, I have had mixed reports from small businesses that I have spoken to. You know, if it is a shopping strip and the outdoor dining is out the front of the drycleaner, then the drycleaner is upset that people cannot park there and go in and do their dry-cleaning. Although a lot of the restaurants of course love it. And I have also had some reports, you know, some of them look better than others. Like the ones around the city look quite nice, whereas other ones I have seen are just like those traffic barriers around a car park and they are pretty ugly. So what is the long-term plan for this?

Mr LEANE: Mr Limbrick, do you want me to touch on the permit system and some licensing first and then go—

Mr LIMBRICK: Yes.

Mr LEANE: So I think this was a lesson, a great example, in that permits and different licences can be dealt with expediently compared to previous years, because of the aspiration to get this up and running in a hurry to support those particular hospitality businesses. The overall plan was just to be able to increase their patronage.

Mr LIMBRICK: Yes.

Mr LEANE: So the Parliamentary Secretary to the Premier, Steve Dimopoulos, is actually running a program about exactly what you are speaking about, and we had a session with local government—a lot of CEOs—only recently, and councils as well: how can we take this example and just utilise it into the future so businesses are not waiting for, you know, long periods of time for permits that afford them to alter their business for the better or even start their businesses? A great example was given to me by the Mornington Peninsula council. They actually took over the main road in Mornington, and their example was originally that it would have taken months and months and months to get a permit off VicRoads to be able to occupy that particular space. You know, there was a desire, and they managed to do it in a short period of time.

As far as the outdoor dining, I think as a whole we are pretty happy that it has been quite successful. I take your point that it can be a bit hit and miss, and I think we have learned from that. And I know there is a desire for a lot of enterprises to do a similar thing every summer. And I think the work that Steve Dimopoulos is doing is sort of centred around how we can be able to do that. But I did have conversations with some councils and some enterprises that to take a car park away at the front of a strip shopping centre or even any sort of shopping centre, people used to want to jump off a cliff, particularly the enterprises. But after the experience of actually getting more patronage, finding out that it was not the end of the world, people can park nearby—you know, Main Street in Mornington is a perfect example. I think there is a really good future for this type of outdoor dining and entertainment, and we are working with Steve Dimopoulos and the councils. Our expectation is that we want to see the councils support any successful outdoor dining they have into winter if they can. I am always happy to advocate for us to support councils to assist these enterprises in any way.

Mr LIMBRICK: Thanks. How do you make sure that these permits in future will be expedited? Obviously it is possible. Now we have realised it is possible, how do we make sure that continues?

Mr LEANE: I think that is the work that the Parliamentary Secretary to the Premier is doing. I just think that we learned that it can be done and it can be done in an expedient way. I respect that these enterprises can sometimes be dealing with a number of different agencies, not just state government agencies. Look, I think that there is a real future for it as far as making sure we can assist enterprises to get their permits done in a quick fashion to get them going.

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Limbrick. Mr Maas.

Mr MAAS: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Minister. If I could take you to the Growing Suburbs Fund, like many of my other colleagues on the committee already have, you mentioned that there was \$50 million that had been received there. I was hoping you would be able to take us through some of the projects that have been funded through the last budget.

Mr LEANE: Yes, sure. As I mentioned before, one of the examples before was the \$4.3 million for the integrated youth services hub in Rosebud. This will create a multi-use, fit-for-purpose youth hub that will be co-located on an existing sporting civic site. It will service the southern peninsula region and have a strong focus on youth mental health. The double-storey facility will include multipurpose rooms, dedicated consulting rooms and a series of meeting rooms as well as dedicated clinic rooms and family consulting suites. I was lucky enough to go down there and talk to the council about this particular project in recent times. I have got to say some of the councillors were really proud that they have got to this point and got this funding. They have been advocating for this particular type of service down on the peninsula for quite a while. Looking at their plans and looking at their aspirations and what they believe this centre will be, I think there will be jurisdictions right across Australia coming to look at the end product of what this is. I think it is a spectacular facility and a great vision from the council down there. I am really glad that it has been supported and well advocated for by the local MP down there.

There is \$3.5 million for an early years and community hub in West Maddingley. West Maddingley early years and community hub will deliver significant infrastructure for three- and four-year-old kindergarten, maternal and child health facilities, spaces for allied and family services and community rooms for programs for those aged 65 and over. Currently there is a shortfall of 90 places for four-year-old kindergarten in the Maddingley area, and with plans for a future 8000 residents this facility will be extremely utilised. I think it is a perfect example of the Growing Suburbs Fund—where these suburbs have grown to an extent—and what is badly needed. That is a great example of that.

There is \$3.2 million for the Macedon Ranges regional sports precinct. The Macedon Ranges regional sports precinct will deliver a 15-hectare regional park, including generous open spaces, gardens, a wetland, an outdoor gym, barbecue areas, a play space and a walking/cycling fitness loop. Funding from the GSF will be used to deliver a series of connected outdoor community spaces and facilities, including an outdoor exercise area, recreational facilities and 4.5 kilometres of connected off-road paths for walking, running and cycling, delivering improved social connections and health outcomes for the growing Macedon Ranges community.

And \$3 million for the Wyndham Cultural Centre redevelopment project will transform the existing Wyndham Cultural Centre into a centre for creativity and relaunch the centre as the Wyndham Arts Centre. The redevelopment will include a refurbished 497-seat auditorium, a new gallery, an artists studio and also a co-working lounge.

Mr MAAS: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Mr Newbury.

Mr NEWBURY: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Minister. Gee, my ears pricked up before when you were talking about Main Street, Mornington, Minister. You have not pocketed \$1.3 million as well for any property sales down in Main Street, Mornington, have you?

Mr LEANE: You are so boring and predictable. It is—

Mr NEWBURY: Well, government corruption is pretty important.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, I would remind you to keep your questions in scope, once again.

Mr NEWBURY: Minister, just to close the loop on the Growing Suburbs Fund, you spoke before and were asked about the round 1 outcome of funding being directed into 80 per cent Labor seats; round 2, similar figure. You suggested that the advice was put to you from a departmental panel. At any stage have you changed, amended or rejected advice from that panel, or on every occasion have you accepted the advice?

Mr LEANE: No, I have accepted what has been put to me. I think your theme around whether more funding has gone into Labor-held seats than Liberal-held seats—I mean, the Liberal Party hold very few seats—

Mr NEWBURY: Well, we hold 60 per cent of the Parliament's seats.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, could you allow the minister to answer your proposition.

Mr LEANE: You hold very few seats. I think you are feeling a bit hard done by, but I am not too sure if by magic we could create more Liberal seats so more funding can go to those seats. The reality is the Liberal Party hold very few seats and the Labor Party holds many seats. Once again you have gone down a conspiracy line that—

Mr NEWBURY: Would you be surprised to hear that—

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, could you allow the minister to complete his answer, please.

Mr NEWBURY: He has just completed his answer.

The CHAIR: But you are interrupting him, Mr Newbury.

Mr NEWBURY: Would you be surprised to hear that the majority of that 79 per cent area is in coalition-held seats?

Mr LEANE: No. I am saying to you that there is a panel that decides this. You spoke about funding going to that Rosebud facility—sorry, one of your colleagues spoke about money going to that Rosebud facility. There was an application from that council for two projects, and that was their priority project.

We are working with the councils on their priority projects. We work closely with the councils on their priority projects and we ask them if they can—and it is not compulsory—to prioritise which projects they would like to see funded perhaps before others. We would love to be able to support every application. There is a limited amount of money, but it goes a long way, and as I said before, these are great projects. They are not only great for the community but, as I was saying before, they are the type and size projects that really support that lower end—not lower end but that smaller end—of the construction sector and support local jobs. They really go a long way in supporting local jobs. We are proud of this fund. As I said before, I think it was 149 projects it has already delivered that communities are already enjoying. Whether they are community centres, whether they are early learning centres or whether they are multi-use cultural centres, they are already enjoying those particular projects. I think they are great and they are there to see. You can look for conspiracies if you want, but I enjoy actually—

Mr NEWBURY: It will just keep going by majority into Labor seats, but that is just the way it is, I guess.

Mr LEANE: I cannot help it if the Liberal—

Mr NEWBURY: Can I ask in relation to—

Members interjecting.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, if you put a proposition, the witnesses are entitled to answer it.

Mr LEANE: I am not responsible for your electoral outcome. You are.

Mr NEWBURY: No, but you are responsible for pork-barrelling.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, if you put a proposition to the witnesses, the witnesses are entitled to answer it.

Mr NEWBURY: You can talk about the election, but government funds are being spent in Labor seats. We all know it is happening, and it is pork-barrelling.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, it is unfair to put a proposition to the witness and not allow the witness to answer it. The minister has the call.

Mr LEANE: Do not go changing, because I will be looking forward to the next one.

Mr NEWBURY: In relation to your review that you spoke about earlier that you announced last month, the audit also found 45 per cent of customer-facing staff experienced harassment.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury, your time has expired. Mr Richardson.

Mr RICHARDSON: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Minister, for your time today. I want to take you to the important topic of public libraries funding, and we know that it is not just the educational book outcomes there or the digital outcomes but also the support and comfort and community space that is provided to people in our libraries. Minister, I want to take you to page 71 of budget paper 3. The public libraries resource program will receive \$9.3 million over four years. What will the total funding amount for public libraries be in 2021–22?

Mr LEANE: Thanks so much, Mr Richardson, for your question. I think we have had a conversation in recent times around how important public libraries have been in the last 18 months—even obviously before that, but their support for the community in recent times has been absolutely spectacular. So the answer to your question is that the 2021–22 Victorian budget will actually go to a record of that particular support. Public libraries in Victoria will go to a record amount of \$58.6 million. The public libraries resource program will increase by 3.5 per cent in this year's budget to a record \$47.4 million. This funding enables our libraries across Victoria to buy new books and collection items, run online services and deliver outreach programs.

In the Victorian budget 2020–21 a funding boost of \$11.1 million over two years was provided to fund new libraries, library upgrades and renovations through the Living Libraries Infrastructure Program. In 2020–21, 26 library projects were funded across the state, totalling \$10 million. In 2021–22, \$10.1 million will be available for another funding round of the Living Libraries Infrastructure Program. We will continue to support also the Premier's Reading Challenge to be able to buy books on the challenge reading list. I have got to say I acknowledge the advocacy of Public Libraries Victoria. They are a great association that are obviously very passionate about the sector that they work in, and can I acknowledge again the work that librarians and staff have done in public libraries in recent times. Obviously the global pandemic has been a challenge for everyone, but the way they have managed to maintain services during times of difficulty has been absolutely magnificent.

You know, Mr Richardson, as you stated, it is much more than a place now to borrow books, and you just have to look at the students that are accessing the free wi-fi after school and also some elderly people. It is a great place of equity where people can access those sorts of services, but on top of that they have become really important social hubs as far as the staff of libraries have really gone a long way to make sure there are all sorts of services available. Whether they might be able to call someone in, if someone needs a certain type of support, they help identify that and make sure that they can have access to experts who can support in this area. It is so much more than books. I was lucky enough to go down to the Bass shire, to Cowes, and speak to the Bass shire—their libraries actually loan out surfboards, which I thought was pretty impressive.

Mr RICHARDSON: Surfing the net and surfing the waves.

Mr LEANE: I think the theory is that before you go out and buy yourself an expensive surfboard and a heap of wetsuits you can have a loan and see if you like it. They are amazing facilities. We are really proud of them. I am really proud of the record funding. I am hoping to make an announcement that we will actually increase that funding in coming days because, as I said, it is great, important work that they do. I cannot speak highly enough of the libraries and the people that work in them.

Mr RICHARDSON: I might leave it there. In the time I have got surfing the net and surfing the web and the ocean. There we go. Thank you very much, Minister.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Richardson, and thank you, Minister and officials. That concludes the time we have available for consideration of the local government portfolio. 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. The committee will take a short break before resuming consideration with you of your suburban development portfolio.

Mr LEANE: Chair, could I put on the record the figure of Working for Victoria?

The CHAIR: Sure.

Mr LEANE: It has employed 5450 people in councils in Victoria.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Excellent. I declare this hearing adjourned.

Witnesses withdrew.