

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the Cultural and Creative Industries in Victoria

Melbourne – Wednesday 12 March 2025

MEMBERS

Georgie Purcell – Chair

Richard Welch – Deputy Chair

John Berger

Katherine Copsey

Moira Deeming

Bev McArthur

Tom McIntosh

Evan Mulholland

Sonja Terpstra

PARTICIPATING MEMBERS

Gaelle Broad

Georgie Crozier

David Davis

David Ettershank

Michael Galea

Renee Heath

Sarah Mansfield

Rachel Payne

WITNESSES (*via videoconference*)

Chris Irvine, Head of Commercial and Production, and

Clare O'Neil, Director, Corporate Affairs, SBS.

The CHAIR: I declare open the Legislative Council Economy and Infrastructure Committee's public hearing for the Inquiry into the Cultural and Creative Industries in Victoria. Please ensure that mobile phones have been switched to silent and that background noise is minimised.

I would like to begin this hearing by respectfully acknowledging the Aboriginal peoples, the traditional custodians of the various lands we are gathered on today, and pay my respects to their ancestors, elders and families. I particularly welcome any elders or community members who are here today to impart their knowledge of this issue to the committee or who are watching the broadcast of these proceedings. I also welcome any other members of the public watching via the live broadcast.

To kick off, I will just get committee members to introduce themselves, starting with Ms Broad on the screen.

Gaëlle BROAD: Hi, I am Gaëlle Broad, Member for Northern Victoria Region.

Michael GALEA: Hi there. Michael Galea, Member for South-Eastern Metropolitan Region.

Katherine COPSEY: Katherine Copsey, Member for Southern Metropolitan.

The CHAIR: Georgie Purcell, Member for Northern Victoria.

Richard WELCH: Richard Welch, Member for North-East Metropolitan Region.

David DAVIS: David Davis.

Evan MULHOLLAND: Evan Mulholland, Northern Metro.

The CHAIR: Wonderful. Thanks, members. Thank you very much for appearing before us today.

All evidence taken is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and further subject to the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information you provide during the hearing is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you say during this hearing, but if you go elsewhere and repeat the same things, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing, and then transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee's website. For the Hansard record, can you both please state your full names and the organisation you are appearing on behalf of.

Clare O'NEIL: Clare O'Neil, Director of Corporate Affairs at SBS.

Chris IRVINE: Christopher Irvine, Head of Commercial and Production.

The CHAIR: Wonderful. Thank you so much. We now welcome your opening comments but ask they are kept to around 10 minutes to ensure there is plenty of time for discussion and questions.

Clare O'NEIL: Okay. Thank you, Chair. I will try and stick to that limit. It should be okay.

Good afternoon, Chair and committee members. Thank you for the invitation to SBS to appear before this committee. Thank you again for accommodating our request to appear virtually. We do apologise for not appearing in person. We have a pre-existing community event this evening, which has been in the calendar for some time.

SBS is a hybrid-funded national public broadcaster. The majority of our funding comes from government appropriations. This was around \$335 million in 2023–24. The remainder of our operating budget is from own-source revenue, predominantly commercial revenue through advertising and sponsorship. This was around about \$159 million in 2023–24.

SBS plays a distinctive and important role in contemporary Australia. We are Australia's multilingual and multicultural and First Nations public broadcaster. We deliver national multiplatform services that inform, educate, entertain and reflect Australia's diverse communities. We are one of the most linguistically diverse broadcasters, delivering content in over 60 languages. SBS News is the most trusted news brand in Australia, according to the latest *Reuters Institute Digital News Report*. SBS has also been named Australian podcast Publisher of the Year for three years running. We provide essential services, such as SBS Learn English for people with low or no English proficiency; Australia Explained, a resource for new migrants and refugees; and SBS Examines, which addresses misinformation circulating in the community. We also have SBS Learn as part of our offering, providing resources to teachers and educators, and our current series on understanding Ramadan and Eid was developed as part of our valued partnership with the Islamic Museum of Australia, based in Thornbury. These achievements and outputs speak to our focus on delivering value for Australian audiences wherever they are across the country. We support the social, civic and economic participation of diverse communities, which is more critical than ever.

We are pleased to have a longstanding presence in and commitment to Victoria. SBS began 50 years ago this year, in 1975, with two radio stations, one of which was in Melbourne. Today we have a highly visible presence in Melbourne through our office in Federation Square. Staffing at this location includes a range of team members from news and current affairs, media sales, corporate affairs, human resources, language programs, community activations and technology. Indeed many of our language programs are entirely staffed and produced out of Victoria. In no particular order these are: Bislama, Malay, Amharic, Hakha Chin, Hebrew, Hmong, Khmer, Karen, Mongolian, Rohingya, Oromo, Tigrinya, Armenian and Bosnian. We have deep connections into Victoria's diverse and growing multilingual and multicultural communities. Our audio services connect with the estimated 30 per cent of households that use a language other than English at home. We are also present on the ground in communities across Victoria throughout the calendar year for important community and cultural celebrations, including Lunar New Year, NAIDOC Week, Ramadan and Eid al-Fitr, and Diwali/Deepavali. This includes activations and activities in regional Victoria, including the Golden Dragon Museum in Bendigo for Lunar New Year and the Mildura Sunraysia Diwali Festival. We also do a number of outdoor broadcasts throughout Victoria, including at the Greek, Indonesian, Italian, Korean and Filipino community festivals. We are also proud to have a longstanding partnership with the Victorian Multicultural Commission that covers a range of activities.

We have a long history of partnering and working with Victorian cultural and creative industries, including through commissioning productions, partnering with VicScreen and engaging Victoria's high-quality cast and crew workforce filming in the state. We are especially proud that most of these in fact have been award winners across a range of categories and ceremonies. In particular we have worked closely with cultural industries in Victoria to create our premium, marquee series, including a scripted drama about family violence in *Safe Home*; edgy family crime drama *Swift Street*, which was created, written and directed by young Melburnian Tig Terera and shot around Thornbury, Northcote and Preston. We have had the magnificent series *New Gold Mountain*, a historic drama about the goldfields of regional Victoria in the 1850s, shot in Ballarat and told from the perspectives of Chinese, female and Indigenous participants; *Hungry Ghosts*, a supernatural drama featuring Melbourne's Vietnamese Australian community; and the drama series *Sunshine*, which was unsurprisingly shot in Sunshine.

Nearly done. SBS's government funding is about one-third that of the ABC's, and we make significantly less commissioned scripted drama and commissioned programming generally, scripted drama being the most expensive content to make. We simply do not have comparable scale; however, the significant commissioning investment we make in Victoria reflects our strong engagement and commitment to the growth and sustainability of the sector. In terms of non-drama, we have documentary series *Meet the Neighbours*; episodes of the *Great Australian Walks*; *Little J and Big Cuz*, a First Nations Australian kids animation which has won Logies, awards from the Australian Teachers of Media and been nominated for AACTA's award for best children's program, all made in Victoria. And of course we have *Yokayi Footy* and *Yokayi Footy Shorts*, a celebration of Aussie Rules football from a First Nations perspective, and we have more in the pipeline.

Averaged over the last four years, SBS has committed a substantial proportion – about 20 per cent of external content production budget – in Victoria, and as I noted earlier, in particular we over-index in Victoria in our spend on premium scripted drama productions, which sits at about 34 per cent. We do this not only due to our commitment to engaging with creatives across the country but also because of the strength of talent in Victoria in front of and behind the camera. We work productively with VicScreen on a wide range of projects and will continue to work with them and others on the development and delivery of the content that meets our charter commitments. Thank you again for having us here today. We are happy to take any questions.

The CHAIR: Great. Thank you very much. I will go to members for questions. We will start with Ms Broad on the screen since I forgot her before.

Gaelle BROAD: That is fine. All is well. Thank you very much for attending today; it is great to have your contribution. I am just interested – I am based in Bendigo, regional Victoria, representing northern Victoria – do you have any staff based in regional Victoria? I am interested in that.

Clare O'NEIL: All of our services are nationally based, so unlike the ABC we do not have that specific regional remit as part of our charter, and we are not funded to do that either. So we do not have people based in regional centres, as a rule, anywhere in Australia.

Gaelle BROAD: Has that always been the case?

Clare O'NEIL: I believe so, yes. We just do not have that local network that the ABC does. It is quite a different offering in terms of services.

Gaelle BROAD: Okay. Would you like to be able to have staff based in regional areas? Do you think it would make a difference to your programming?

Clare O'NEIL: We do a lot already in terms of community activations and commissioned content in regional areas, including some of the examples I gave in the opening statement. We are just not set up in terms of infrastructure to be able to do that with the way we currently operate. But if we had triple the budget, like the ABC does, we may well be able to do it.

Gaelle BROAD: The previous witness from the Association of Artist Managers called for SBS to increase representation of Victorian artists in their programming, and they mentioned ensuring spending aligns with population and cultural contribution in Victoria. What is your response to their submission? I am not sure if you had a chance to hear them live.

Chris IRVINE: I am afraid we did not.

Clare O'NEIL: No, I am afraid we have not. I am happy to take that on notice if you would like us to read it, look at their evidence and then address it directly.

Gaelle BROAD: Yes. That would be fantastic. Thank you. Now, I did notice during your submission you talked about emerging artists, and there was a particular program for that, but how difficult – is it easy? How does someone break into the industry?

Clare O'NEIL: This sounds like you, Chris.

Chris IRVINE: I am very happy to take this question. Look, it is incredibly complicated. I think it is an incredibly competitive arena and opportunities are thin on the ground, especially for emerging practitioners. And that is one of the reasons why SBS unashamedly prioritises these sorts of opportunities for practitioners from backgrounds which for reasons unknown have been under-represented in the Australian screen sector. We have got a number of initiatives that drive new voices and talent to our screens. The most successful of those is a strand called digital originals, which is a fiction strand. It is a short-form, six-by-10-minute dramatic strand which looks for opportunities to showcase new talent. That scheme has been running for just shy of 10 years now, and some of the emerging talent at the time who have come from those teams have gone on to stellar careers, including careers in Hollywood. So it is a small offering that we are able to facilitate, including many, many practitioners in Victoria who have had shows developed through that strand, and there are shows currently in our pipeline which will be made in Victoria in that strand. We are doing as much as we possibly can in this space.

We also have a talent escalator program which again has a similar kind of currency – around 10 years old now – which seeks to escalate opportunity. One of the problems with the Australian screen sector is there are some amazing practitioners who are in very hot demand, but unlike the US, where there is a far bigger volume of production and therefore opportunities, there are less chances for people to escalate careers. And we have a scheme that does exactly that. It escalates talent both in front of and behind the camera, again from backgrounds which are presently under-represented, to give those voices a chance to break through. And we have seen enormous success from that strand too.

Gaelle BROAD: Hopefully there are opportunities for people in regional areas too as part of that.

Clare O'NEIL: Yes, there are.

Chris IRVINE: In fact, just speaking to that point, we routinely as a commissioning team go across the country, the breadth and depth of the country, espousing this opportunity and calling for people from every corner of the country to submit applications to this. So we absolutely do mine, because, frankly, good ideas come from everywhere.

Gaelle BROAD: Just on that, I did see you mentioned Bendigo, and I know the Chair and I both represent northern Victoria. It is about 49 per cent of the state.

Clare O'NEIL: Enormous.

Gaelle BROAD: It is a big area. That is right. But I guess I am interested how you connect with regional communities, because it is a very vast area. I can see that you just do the one event in Bendigo, which is in northern Victoria, but it is a big part of the state. How do you connect when you are getting out and about?

Clare O'NEIL: We have got a number of ways that we connect with communities. There are some special cultural moments that we look to partner with in regional Australia as well as metropolitan areas. Lunar New Year is one and Diwali/Deepavali is another, NAIDOC and Ramadan and Eid. We do have limited resources, but we do always make an effort to include regional communities in those activations and events where we can. We do seek to have representation in every state and territory and in regional communities as well. We sadly do not have an unlimited budget for those sorts of activities, but we make sure that we cover as much ground as we can with what we have got. Of course there have been some productions in – I believe the –

Gaelle BROAD: Have you had one at Ballarat? Have you had some productions –

Clare O'NEIL: Yes, we had *New Gold Mountain* shot around Bendigo and Ballarat, and I believe the *Meet the Neighbours* was shot in – Chris?

Chris IRVINE: The name is on the tip of my tongue. It is a regional township in Victoria, and it is – you had some familiarity with it.

Clare O'NEIL: Yes. It was somewhere near where a lot of my family is based, which is Castlemaine and Newstead.

Gaelle BROAD: I was going to say: was it Castlemaine?

Clare O'NEIL: Yes. It was a place like that.

Gaelle BROAD: That is helpful. Can you speak briefly to what impact you contribute when a production is based in a regional area? What sort of impact does it have? I know we had Liam Neeson in the area recently and had potholes filled, so we are very happy to have more productions based in regional areas.

Clare O'NEIL: That is exciting.

Gaelle BROAD: But from the SBS perspective, what impact does it have?

Chris IRVINE: From SBS's perspective directly, not as much, but obviously the township where any of our shows are being made will benefit from having more people spending money in the shops. I think that is probably the principal benefit. It is also an opportunity when those productions are in town to peer through that

curtain, and I fully appreciate that for regional townships it might not be an opportunity they get regularly enough. But there is certainly value from seeing the activity go on in their neighbourhoods.

Clare O'NEIL: Sorry, if I may, just to correct the record, it was Maryborough.

Chris IRVINE: There it is. Thank you.

Gaelle BROAD: Excellent. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Wonderful. Thank you, Ms Broad. We better go to another party first; many of you are here. We will go to Mr Galea.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Chair. It is another party. Thank you very much, both, for joining us today. It is great to have an iconic broadcaster such as the SBS join us. I note from your submission that you noted that there are 192 full-time employees equivalent in Victoria, 14 per cent of your staff. Do you have that breakdown by each state and territory?

Clare O'NEIL: I do not have a breakdown of FTEs. In our annual report is the breakdown of –

David DAVIS: 172 is what you say in the annual report.

Clare O'NEIL: Yes. That number does not include casuals. A number of our staff are casuals, so that is the differential in the number. It is 192 FTE. I do not have that breakdown state by state, but I can take that on notice.

Michael GALEA: Sure, if you can take that on notice, that would be terrific.

Clare O'NEIL: But if you want to see an ongoing employee total, then it is in our annual report.

Michael GALEA: Thank you very much for that. Obviously we do have multicultural Australians living right across the length and breadth of this country, but the two big centres you would have to say would be Melbourne and Sydney. I obviously understand that currently your headquarters are in Sydney. There was significant media commentary about a potential move to another part of Sydney, and I understand that those plans have fallen through but you are still planning to invest in a significant new hub in the west of Sydney. I note that you have the facility at Federation Square, but the vast majority of people from foreign backgrounds in this state do not live in the inner city; they live in the outer suburbs. If you look at places like Dandenong, more than six in 10 were actually born overseas, and many more have parents who were born overseas. I am just curious as to why you are now going to have two key hubs in the city of Sydney whilst not having any physical presence in the outer suburbs of Melbourne, in places like Dandenong, which are, if not the most, amongst the most multicultural in the country.

Clare O'NEIL: I will go back to the beginning of that story. The relocation feasibility study, which commenced in 2023 and concluded last year, was a process commenced and run by the federal government, and that was narrowly scoped to look at western Sydney only. It did not consider any other alternative location—

David DAVIS: Shamefully.

Michael GALEA: That was not my interjection, but I would agree with that.

The CHAIR: Let us take that as a comment.

Michael GALEA: I will allow you to continue, please.

Clare O'NEIL: As part of the resolution of that process, the federal government decided to provide SBS with funding for a production hub in western Sydney. This is not something we can fund ourselves. While it is a decision of the SBS board ultimately whether to move, as the minister noted in her statement in December last year, full relocation is expensive. The available funding to us is for western Sydney. That is a matter for the federal government.

Michael GALEA: So just to be clear, you are completely ruling out that hub being in the outer suburbs of Melbourne.

Clare O'NEIL: I am saying that the current funding availability is for western Sydney.

Michael GALEA: If you had your say, if SBS had its choice in this, would you like to see facilities such as that being built somewhere like Dandenong or Werribee or Broadmeadows?

Clare O'NEIL: We are always looking to expand our facilities. I do not think I am able to get into hypotheticals about exactly where that could be. Even the western Sydney process is likely to be contested by a number of different councils and LGAs, so I cannot really comment on that.

Michael GALEA: Sure. The 14 per cent of your staff in Victoria, once a potential western Sydney hub is open, do you see that percentage further decreasing?

Clare O'NEIL: No, I do not. It is intended to support new content production. We are not looking at relocating any particular staff or functions at this stage.

Michael GALEA: Sure. There is immense community work that you do in supporting many wonderful festivals across the state, and I do notice there are some in the outer suburbs of Melbourne in the list you have provided us as well. I could not see any in the south-east, though. Are you aware of any in the south-east suburbs that you have supported in the previous financial year?

Clare O'NEIL: I can take that on notice. My Melbourne geography is not good enough, I am afraid, to be able to know which are the south-east suburbs.

Michael GALEA: No problem. I will not put you on the spot with that right now. I appreciate –

Clare O'NEIL: I do have a comprehensive list of locations, though, so I am happy to come back to you with that detail.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. I note of course that we have many wonderful multicultural communities across Victoria, but they are especially prominent in the south-east. I would like to ask you just briefly as well – we have just had the music industry in before us – about the importance of promoting local talent and local artists. It is around two months now until the Eurovision Song Contest, and SBS is a very, very important part of our participation in that event. How important are events such as Eurovision for promoting local acts such as Go-Jo or other acts to the world stage?

Clare O'NEIL: I think it is very important. You are probably able to talk to that.

Chris IRVINE: It is an opportunity of a lifetime. It is something that we look at pretty carefully in terms of who is going to represent Australia on that international stage. I think it is very significant when you look at the global viewership that Eurovision commands not just on the night but as the songs are being socialised ahead of the event. The fan base is pretty vocal. There are people already talking about Go-Jo and the Go-Jo song that has been submitted. It is a conversation that will go until 17 May.

Michael GALEA: Are we going to win?

Chris IRVINE: I hope so.

Michael GALEA: So do we all. Thank you very much. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Galea. I will go to Mr Davis.

David DAVIS: Can I thank you both for giving evidence. I want to begin with a comment. I note that you are both from Sydney. You are here via electronic means, and I have no difficulty with that in itself. Neither of you particularly understand Melbourne or Victoria – and I am not being critical of you personally, but I do think that that is a problem for our state and the representation that has occurred. I want to also say something about the disgraceful decision of the federal government to put a new hub in western Sydney. It is absolutely outrageous that both government-funded national broadcasters are based in Sydney and both of them are

looking to put additional facilities into western Sydney. Melbourne is by some measures the largest city already – it is close to that in any event – and we should frankly have at least one of these national broadcasters based here. I understand that you have to answer to the federal government, Ms O’Neil, so I am not being critical of you in that respect. I get your position. But nonetheless we do not have to accept that or fail to point out some of the difficulties.

In terms of the figures, the figures in your annual report are little different from the ones that are in your submission. We note that there are 172 Victorian staff, both full-time and part-time, listed as ongoing, and 12 – I make that 184. But that is not 184 full-time equivalent, it is significantly less than that in the figures in your annual report. I wonder if you might explain that contradiction between your figures and the figures published in your 2023–24 annual report.

Clare O’NEIL: As I think I flagged earlier, the 192 is all full-time equivalent staff and that is different from non-ongoing. Non-ongoing represents a specified period; it does not include casuals. That is on the bottom table, the 12, so that is people on a fixed-term contract. But the 192 FTE figure includes casuals and it adds up their contributions to result in a higher overall number of full-time equivalents.

David DAVIS: But when you look at the figures that are actually in the annual report, there are non-ongoing employees – casuals, if you will – in that, which, when you add them to the employee number, is less than your 192. What you are saying does not seem to make sense, to be blunt on this.

Clare O’NEIL: That is fine. The bottom of that table does contain a note saying that casuals and board members are not included in that non-ongoing figure. That non-ongoing figure only relates to people on a fixed-term contract or a non-ongoing contract for a specified task or something like that. It does not include our ongoing casual staff, whose work may not be as regular to be able to count it in the same way, but the full-time equivalent figure does include those casuals.

David DAVIS: Would you include for us then a detailed breakdown of that, because it does not seem quite consistent with what is here. I see the note on the bottom, but I also note that in terms of part-time more than 50 of the staff are listed as part-time out of the 172 that are in the main block. It seems to me it is quite a deal less than perhaps your figure shows.

Clare O’NEIL: I can absolutely come back to the committee with a breakdown of how we did that calculation.

David DAVIS: We would appreciate that. That would be great. In terms of board membership, what is the current board membership? How many Victorians are on the board?

Clare O’NEIL: The SBS board is appointed by the minister. Currently our chair is in Victoria, Mr George Savvides AM. Our other board members are in WA, South Australia and New South Wales, and we have one in Queensland, in the Torres Strait.

David DAVIS: How many are from New South Wales?

Clare O’NEIL: If I get that figure wrong, I will get in trouble – four.

David DAVIS: Four. I think my point is made.

Clare O’NEIL: Sorry, excuse me, five if you count the managing director, who is also on the board.

David DAVIS: Right. And how many are Victorians?

Clare O’NEIL: Just one – our chair – at the moment.

David DAVIS: I just think everywhere you look with your organisation – and I am a strong supporter of your organisation; I think it has got a very important role in the multicultural communities – Victoria is under-represented and underspent, and the scale of our multicultural community here is equal to Sydney’s, if not greater. I just want to implore you, and I understand you do not control the whole scene: we need to have some better recognition.

I should ask you a further question. Have you had any engagement with the multicultural commission on the importance of SBS's footprint in Victoria?

Clare O'NEIL: Not on that particular issue, no. We do have a very longstanding partnership with the Victorian Multicultural Commission. We work with them on a number of activities across the year, but we have not had a specific conversation about that to my knowledge.

David DAVIS: Can you check that for me, because in correspondence to me Vivienne Nguyen from the VMC said:

The VMC will raise with SBS the issue of the importance of having a footprint within Melbourne and Victoria that is more reflective of our share of the nation's population.

So that is our peak –

Clare O'NEIL: I will check that. I am not across every conversation we've had with them, but I can look into that, certainly.

David DAVIS: I also just want to be blunt. Has there been some work done on the economic impact of the move to western Sydney?

Clare O'NEIL: That is what the initial feasibility study looked at.

David DAVIS: Can we have a copy of that? I think that will put out some understanding of the economic significance of actually the spending by an organisation like yours.

Clare O'NEIL: Look, that is a document of the department. It is not an SBS document, and it does contain a lot of commercially sensitive information that has not been published, including in relation to development costs. It is likely that the publication of that information would in fact compromise the other process that we are currently involved in.

David DAVIS: What, moving to western Sydney?

Clare O'NEIL: The production hub work that is about to commence.

David DAVIS: We will ask the federal department separately, if that is what you are suggesting.

Clare O'NEIL: That would be a better approach.

David DAVIS: But we actually think that – and I might be speaking for a few members here – there is probably a good understanding that this is the sort of information that we would be interested in. I finally want to just understand the forward projections by SBS of its audience and so forth and the viewership. Is there any material that you can provide us on, with respect to Victoria, what the viewership is and what your projections for it are?

Clare O'NEIL: Chris, do you want to have a go at that?

Chris IRVINE: I am not sure I understand the question in terms of projections. We can certainly break down audience metrics geographically.

David DAVIS: That would be helpful, thank you.

Chris IRVINE: We can take that question on notice. In terms of the projection part of that question, I am not sure we can answer that.

Clare O'NEIL: But yes, we can certainly do a bit of a breakdown of audiences for our services in Victoria, so far as that is possible with the measurements that we have access to.

Chris IRVINE: Indeed.

David DAVIS: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Davis. I will go to Ms Copsey now.

Katherine COPSEY: Thank you. Thanks so much for being with us today. I actually just had two questions. Firstly, I note in your submission your reference to own-source revenue. I just want to get my head around whether it is a consideration or a goal of SBS currently to balance or even to moderate or reduce your dependence on advertising income. If you can indicate to me: what more could either the federal or the state government do to support SBS to reduce its reliance on advertising revenue, in particular to enable you to make decisions around values-aligned advertising, such as being able to refuse advertising from harmful industries such as the gambling industry?

Clare O'NEIL: Thanks for your question. We feel it is incumbent on SBS to be able to produce as much of our own-source revenue as possible because that just enables us to provide more and better services to our audiences right across Australia. Presently there are no plans to seek to reduce that advertising – or increase it, I might add. We are just seeking to basically maximise the value of what we can deliver for the Australian consumer.

In relation to categories of advertising, we do have our commercial funding and external relationship guidelines that set out that so long as an advertisement complies with all legal and regulatory requirements, and the category you have mentioned is a highly regulated one, we do not make judgments about the advertisements. However, we are in fact I think the only broadcaster perhaps in the world to enable our audiences to opt out of particular categories for SBS On Demand, and gambling is one of those categories. So for people watching On Demand, users can go in, select a category that they no longer wish to see ads for, and then they will not be served any of those ads. So we just provide that as an audience experience measure as well.

Katherine COPSEY: Thank you. And then my second question was around some of the programs. We have heard a lot today and through the course of the inquiry around the importance of pipelines for developing talent. We have also heard a lot in the creative industry space around how it is not just the talent you see on screen but also all those core skills around lighting, tech, production management and so on. I would love you to run through a couple of the programs that you have highlighted in your submission, such as the talent escalator and other incubation programs that you do, and if you could, give an indication of the ability of those programs to scale up were more funding available for those particular streams.

Chris IRVINE: I am very happy to take that. Thank you so much for that question. I think as an opening statement I would say our appetite for activities like the ones you have just described far outweighs our capacity to pay for them, and we direct enormous amounts of resource in terms of time and energy into exactly what you are talking about. There is no question that when you look at the emerging talent base in this market, it requires an extraordinary level of intervention to create opportunities, especially for talent that for whatever reason has not been prioritised historically. SBS has a really proud history of doing that. We do not do it alone. We do it in partnership with federal agencies like Screen Australia and with every state agency, importantly including Film Victoria. From the very inception of the talent escalator program one of the common threads when we were socialising the idea behind it was meetings that I had with every state agency, all of whom embraced the idea immediately, because I think it is demonstrable that these opportunities are lacking. So the talent escalator, as I mentioned a little earlier, is bespoke to individuals just to seek ways to find opportunities to escalate their careers, to take their careers to the next level. Digital originals is a strand for those creatives to have their own voice – not just be a crew on someone else's project but actually tell their own story.

One of the things that we are doing in Victoria that we are actually not doing anywhere else in the country is we have a bespoke initiative with Film Victoria to commission the production of theatrical feature films. This is something that nobody is doing very much of – certainly not enough. We have a partnership which is called Originate, which is looking for unique Victorian voices to publish theatrical movies on commercial screens. We have committed to making three of those over the next few years. We have already had two, and there is a third in active development. On its face, that is an isolated example of things that we are doing that others are not. I could go on in terms of the other strands and attempts we have made. There have been short-form strands that we have created in partnership with state agencies to foster new voices. We have developed documentary factual filmmaking strands in the short form, again looking for opportunities for talent that might not be able to get commissioned at the premium end of the scale, that have awesome stories that will do really well. A few years ago we had a strand called Curious Australia, heavily supported by Film Victoria, which was a half-hour documentary strand, again with emerging voices finding it hard to break through. We fully recognise the

problem you are talking about. We would love to do much more to support these ideas. Our only constraint is economics.

Clare O'NEIL: We have also got the emerging writers incubator, which we fund. Notably, it is not for people to work on SBS projects but for people to work on a number of different projects that we do not even see the benefit of. We recognise the importance of incubating that creative talent where it otherwise might not have an opportunity.

Chris IRVINE: Again, in partnership with state agencies like Film Victoria and seeking to find a year's paid employment for writers to learn the craft of development inside an established production company, the goal being that that writer comes out the other side with experience that they are just not going to be able to garner on their own. We take care of the overhead for a year, which frees them up to be creative.

Katherine COPSEY: Fantastic. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Great. Thanks, Ms Copsey. I will go to Mr Welch.

Richard WELCH: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, both of you, for being here today. I am going to go back to Victoria's share of the business of SBS in Australia, and we have to compare it to NSW because there is no other benchmark that makes sense to benchmark it against. Why is there only 14 per cent of staff in Melbourne? Why isn't it 40 per cent?

Clare O'NEIL: Decisions about where we base our workforce are made across a range of factors, including the impact of our ability to fulfill our charter and serving audiences, the most efficient use of taxpayer funds –

David DAVIS: It is cheaper in Victoria.

Clare O'NEIL: Sorry?

David DAVIS: Rents are cheaper in Victoria.

Clare O'NEIL: There are a range of other considerations, obviously. We do continue to have a meaningful and visible presence in Victoria.

Richard WELCH: But what are those other considerations? That is exactly what I would like to know, because your ability to fulfil your charter is not affected by having a better representation in Melbourne and it is not more expensive to do things in Melbourne. So what are those other considerations?

Clare O'NEIL: There is the capacity to serve our audiences. For example, in relation to our language services, there will be some language groups that are more highly represented in New South Wales and some that are more highly represented in Victoria, and so when we are looking to staff those services, we look at the available talent. For example –

Richard WELCH: But that is not reflected in your numbers, because 83 per cent of your staff are in Sydney.

Clare O'NEIL: The other consideration is that our services are national and they are platform agnostic. Wherever our content is produced, all Australians have the benefit of it. We do not produce less content for Victorians, for example, because of our staffing levels.

Richard WELCH: No, but the concern for us – we have heard from multiple witnesses and it is really fundamental to the terms of reference – is that Victoria needs a sustainable ecosystem of technical staff, artists and other contributors. As a national broadcaster to which we are contributing at least a quarter of funding – and as a population we are at least a quarter – we would like the investment back into the state to be at least broadly commensurate with that. The skew is so out of whack – 83 per cent of staff. As a parochial interest of this state, we would want to understand why it is not far closer to 40 per cent or 50 per cent. If 83 per cent is acceptable in Sydney, why isn't 40 per cent acceptable in Victoria?

Clare O'NEIL: We are committed to the people and communities of Victoria. It has always been a significant part of our operations. I think SBS's staffing and production model is slightly different to the

ABC's, for example, in the sense that we have talked about the proportion of production and investment that goes from our commissioning budget into Victoria. That is separate to staffing. Those people are not our staff.

Richard WELCH: Just on that, it says here that you have commissioned over the last four years 83 hours in Victoria. So that – I am doing quick maths – is about half an hour a week over those 4 hours. How does that compare to what is commissioned in New South Wales?

The CHAIR: That can maybe be taken on notice if you prefer.

Richard WELCH: I am happy for that to be on notice.

Clare O'NEIL: SBS commissions very few premium dramas. I could –

Richard WELCH: Sorry to interrupt; I do not want to. Just qualitatively, it is not the fact of the volume; I want to see what the proportion is.

Clare O'NEIL: Yes, we can take that on notice.

Chris IRVINE: The question specifically was New South Wales. I have got the global number in front of me in terms of what that 83 hours is of the whole four-year delivery, but I do not have the New South Wales number, so I will take that on notice.

Richard WELCH: Thank you. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Mr Welch. We will end with Mr Mulholland.

Evan MULHOLLAND: Thank you. Circling back to your favourite topic, the western Sydney hub, just to clarify your comments earlier, was the decision to put the hub in western Sydney a decision of government?

Clare O'NEIL: Yes. That was the opportunity that was available to us.

Evan MULHOLLAND: So it was the federal government that insisted that it had to be western Sydney?

Clare O'NEIL: That was the commitment they made, and that was the opportunity that we were given.

Evan MULHOLLAND: The minister's media release on 8 December 2024 – Minister Michelle Rowland says:

I thank the SBS Board and management for their initiative in proposing this exciting project, and look forward to working with them to bring it to fruition.

Is the minister wrong that this was an SBS board and management proposal?

Clare O'NEIL: No, of course not. When the minister provided the report to the board for its consideration, she invited a conversation on other options for an SBS presence in western Sydney, and that was the response to that invitation.

Evan MULHOLLAND: So the minister is not wrong, but she is the one that said it had to be in western Sydney.

Clare O'NEIL: The opportunities available to us were within the parameters of western Sydney.

Evan MULHOLLAND: You can see how I am confused. We have got SBS saying it was a government decision, and we have got the minister saying it was an SBS decision. We as Victorians, and I think we are pretty united as a committee here, are wanting to know how the decision in particular was made, because it is a decision that has been made at the expense of Victoria. So the SBS board and management did some work on the proposal once the minister had made it clear that it was to be in western Sydney?

Clare O'NEIL: The alternative proposal was part of the minister's engagement with the board, and it was in the parameters and in the context of the relocation feasibility study, which was limited to western Sydney.

Evan MULHOLLAND: Again, just as a comment: similar to what Mr Galea was saying, I would say a place like Broadmeadows has quite similar demographic data to Dandenong in terms of our multicultural communities – you have a Turkish community, a Syrian community, Indian communities and Nepalese communities. They are all prominent viewers of SBS who would be quite keen to have an SBS presence, yet we have got both national broadcasters deciding that western Sydney is where they are going to go at the expense of our multicultural growth areas. I will leave it at that. We may indeed write to the federal government to get to the bottom of who actually made the decision, because we are still not quite clear on that.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Mulholland. Mr Galea has asked if he can ask one more question.

Michael GALEA: Thank you for indulging me. Just on Ms Copsy's question earlier around opt-outs for advertising, you have said that you are a leader in that. I was actually only aware of that because you or a colleague mentioned that in a Senate estimates hearing. What is the take-up rate of that and are you doing anything to more widely publicise that option?

Clare O'NEIL: We are actually in the middle of a big push now of emailing all of our SBS On Demand subscribers to advise them of the availability of the service. I think that has resulted in a reasonable uptick in the number of people that have taken it up. I could not tell you the figure today because I am sure it is different to what it was last week, but I can take that on notice.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. I appreciate that.

Clare O'NEIL: The categories that people can opt out of, for the committee's information, are gambling, alcohol advertising or quick service restaurants – so fast food.

Michael GALEA: Thank you very much.

The CHAIR: Wonderful. Thank you, Mr Galea. And just one more quick question from Mr Davis.

David DAVIS: One more quick question, just on this juxtaposition of the ABC going to western Sydney and the SBS going to western Sydney: the SBS charter, which is in section 6 of the Act, has a lot of very important points about diversity of culture and so forth. But at (2)(g) it says:

contribute to the overall diversity of Australian broadcasting and digital media services, particularly taking into account the contribution of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation and the community broadcasting sector ...

How is it possibly consistent there to have both – we only have two government-funded national broadcasters – migrating to western Sydney? How is it consistent with your charter to be part of that and not recognise that the ABC has done the same? Perhaps put your overall diversity somewhere else – Melbourne.

Clare O'NEIL: I think the principal way that we look at that part of the charter is in relation to content outputs and serving audiences. For example, we do a lot of in-language audio programming and the ABC does a lot of regional broadcasting.

David DAVIS: I get that, but this is another aspect of broadcasting and digital media services, particularly taking into account the contribution of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. I would suggest to you that your charter should also reflect all those other diversity matters, for sure, but I would put to you that (2)(g) in your charter would strongly argue for a service that recognises that the other national broadcaster, admittedly far bigger than you, is fully based in Sydney.

Clare O'NEIL: I think the other thing to note, as I have mentioned, is that our services are national services and I think the same services are enjoyed by people all over Australia regardless of where that content is made.

David DAVIS: So it could come from Melbourne just as well and be enjoyed in western Sydney. They would love that, wouldn't they? I am deadly serious.

Clare O'NEIL: I hope everyone enjoys our services, wherever they come from. Certainly we do have a large number of people producing content out of Victoria.

The CHAIR: Great. Thank you. That might be a good place to leave it, because we are right on time. Thank you very much for appearing before us this afternoon and answering a diverse range of questions. That concludes the public hearing.

Committee adjourned.