

# VERIFIED VERSION

## PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

### Inquiry into Budget Estimates 2017–18

Melbourne — 23 May 2017

#### Members

Mr Danny Pearson — Chair

Mr David Morris — Deputy Chair

Mr Steve Dimopoulos

Ms Fiona Patten

Ms Sue Pennicuik

Ms Harriet Shing

Mr Tim Smith

Ms Louise Staley

Ms Vicki Ward

#### Witnesses

Mr John Eren, Minister for Veterans, and

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

**The CHAIR** — I declare open the public hearings for the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee inquiry into the 2017–18 budget estimates. All mobile telephones should now be turned to silent.

I would like to welcome the Minister for Veterans, the Honourable John Eren, MP, and Ms Angela Bourke, Director, Veterans Branch, Department of Premier and Cabinet.

All evidence is taken by the committee under the provisions of the Parliamentary Committees Act, attracts parliamentary privilege and is protected from judicial review. Comments made outside the hearing, including on social media, are not afforded such privilege. Witnesses will not be sworn but are requested to answer questions succinctly, accurately and truthfully. Witnesses found to be giving false or misleading evidence may be in contempt of Parliament and subject to penalty. All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard, and you will be provided with proof versions of the transcript for verification as soon as available. Verified transcripts, presentations and handouts will be placed on the committee's website as soon as possible.

All written communication to witnesses must be provided via officers of the PAEC secretariat. Members of the public gallery cannot participate in the committee's proceedings in any way and cannot photograph, audiorecord or videorecord any part of these proceedings.

Members of the media must remain focused only on the person speaking. Any filming and recording must cease immediately at the completion of the hearing. I invite the witness to make a very brief opening statement of no more than 5 minutes, and this will be followed by questions from the committee.

### **Visual presentation.**

**Mr EREN** — Thank you, Chair. I am delighted once again to provide an update on the important work we do in the veterans portfolio. Achievements in 2016–17: the Shrine of Remembrance once again demonstrates its paramount importance as a place of commemoration, education and reflection; the Premier's Spirit of Anzac Prize recipients travelled to Darwin and Singapore in April this year to mark the 75th anniversary of World War II; since 2004 we have received over 2500 student entries and provided over 240 Victorian students with the opportunity to participate; and I was pleased to extend the number of program participants last year to 22 students attending the overseas trip and 20 students going to Canberra.

The Victorian government provides a range of grants to the veterans portfolio for commemoration and education projects, for restoration and conservation and to provide welfare support for veterans. In 2016–17 there were 119 grants approved, totalling over \$1.4 million. I was pleased to launch RSL Active on 12 May. This initiative will assist the RSL to deliver programs and activities to help reduce social isolation for young veterans. September 2016 marked the one-year anniversary of the opening of the veterans accommodation project in Richmond. These units are currently occupied by young veterans in need of short-term accommodation. In November 2016 the Premier also announced \$109 million for Victoria's homelessness strategy 2020. This will help veterans experiencing chronic homelessness transition to stable and sustainable housing.

A new initiative in 2016–17 was the war history and heritage strategy, which will support Victorians learning to identify and protect our significant heritage. The government is supporting a range of Anzac centenary projects for communities to tell their own Anzac stories. To date over 2.4 million has been spent on Anzac centenary-related grants. In 2016–17 almost \$700 000 for 42 projects was allocated for Anzac centenary community projects. *Messenger Dogs*, a puppet-based primary school show, tells the story of World War I dogs Trick, Nell and Bullet and teaches Victorian students about the bravery and loyalty of the Anzacs. This year the Anzac Day march was led by World War II veterans in honour of the 75th anniversary of 1942. Approximately 30 000 people attended the 2017 dawn service at the shrine.

The Victorian government committed \$1 million for a program of activities to mark the 50th anniversary of the Battle of Long Tan. This was the single greatest state contribution to mark this milestone and educate the community about the sacrifices made by Vietnam veterans. My department estimates that a minimum of 21 000 to 25 000 people in Victoria participated in the program.

In the Victorian budget for 2017–18 the government committed 7.8 million over the next four years to commemorate veterans' services and sacrifice and to support their health and wellbeing. The Shrine of Remembrance will receive an additional \$2.8 million over four years so that it can develop new educational and

commemorative programs and capitalise on the great interest generated by the new Galleries of Remembrance. I am proud of the Victorian government's support for the Galleries of Remembrance, and I hope the federal government will uphold their commitment to repay the state government the money that we are owed for their investment in this project.

The veterans sector study report, commissioned by the veterans council, made 14 recommendations for the veteran community, and I am proud that the government's response supports all 14 recommendations. We will build on the valuable and groundbreaking work of the history and heritage strategy. We will ensure that veterans are included in two new whole-of-government initiatives announced by the budget — the jobs and employment program and the family violence initiative. ADF personnel will benefit from a waiving of the first home owner's eligibility criteria to recognise the special nature of their service.

The transition from the Australian Defence Force to civilian life is a critical time for our servicemen and women as they adjust to life outside the military. Nine hundred thousand dollars over four years is allocated to delivery of the public sector veterans employment strategy and to explore options for an online platform that will assist veterans to access the services they need. The government has committed to employ 250 veterans into the public sector, and we will help veterans translate their ADF experience to the public sector, as well as monitor and address any barriers for veterans in securing employment. The public sector veterans employment strategy is a key component of the government's response to the Victorian *Veterans Sector Study Report 2015*, which I released in February 2017.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you, Minister.

**Ms WARD** — Minister, in your presentation, towards the end, you spoke about the Victorian public sector employment strategy. In my own electorate I have had a very good conversation with Glen Ferrarotto, who helps veterans transition into work, and he talked me through the challenges that veterans have in not only finding employment but adjusting to a completely different kind of work structure and different culture within workplaces. It is much more of a challenge than the average person might actually realise that it can be for veterans to find employment but also to fit in with different employment environments. Can you please talk to us about what resources will be available to help veterans transition into the public sector, being mindful of the challenges that they do face?

**Mr EREN** — Sure. I am very passionate about this portfolio. We proudly say that we are the sporting capital, the major events capital, the most livable city and all of those things. None of those things would be possible if it were not for the services of the men and women who served us so well in the past, and so we are very grateful and indebted to all of those veterans who have served us in the past and currently still serve us today. This is the point where, when they return back to civilian society — they have done their service overseas, they have risked their life and they have come back — they are traumatised, and most of them unfortunately, if they are not physically injured, are psychologically injured. They come home with PTSD and other depression-related illnesses, and they find it quite awkward to fit back into normal society and civilian life.

This particular policy position that we have taken as a government is one where you assess the skill sets that they have — and all of them have a skill set, whether it is in manufacturing, construction, white collar or blue collar — you assess those skills that they have and accordingly try to fit them into a job, because we know how jobs are valuable to fit back into society. So this \$900 000 over four years between 17–18 and 20–21 will explore all of the options to make sure that we help as best we can the veterans who come back from service to fit back into society. And 250 public sector jobs is one way that we can repay them to come back into that society.

Veterans in construction is another very important part of a new policy position that is helping veterans go back into construction. Already there are about five veterans that have been placed on the level crossings works that we are doing — one of the largest projects that we have in the country. Clearly not only did they keep us safe by defending us overseas but they come back and keep us safe in terms of helping with this very important project. So it is working tremendously well. We want to ensure that those 250 veterans are catered for, and that is why that —

**Ms WARD** — How are you going to track them?

**Mr EREN** — This is part of the issue. All of the ex-service organisations have difficulty in tracking their veterans. When they come back they get assessed — they get medical assessments done — and then they are free, and it is really hard to track what state they go to and where they reside, if they reside anywhere. Some go bush; they do not want housing. Some are very hesitant in coming forward because they do not want a handout. Some have real psychological issues, and obviously when that is detected we assess where we can, so it is about making sure that we work in with the ex-service organisations to — —

**Ms WARD** — And how are the ex-service organisations receiving this?

**Mr EREN** — Look, this is fantastic. That is why the service organisations are helping in a number of ways. It is also tracking through [careers.vic.gov.au](http://careers.vic.gov.au), and the public sector commission is also helping. So there is a web page. It has now been prominently circulated through all of the outlets of social media and other ways and means in terms of the technology. Whether it is the [careers.vic.gov.au](http://careers.vic.gov.au) site or whether it is actually the social media aspect of it, all of this news has become so big that we are getting a lot of attention to it. So we are hoping this will bring the veterans out and they will actually go onto these web pages and apply.

**Ms SHING** — Minister, I might pick up there with the limited time that we have available. One of the things that I hear repeatedly from returned service personnel throughout Gippsland and regional Victoria in particular are the mental health challenges that have a very, very long tail on them. It can often be a lifetime of trauma, distress and disconnection from communities after returning from a period of service.

Working with organisations such as Carry On, the various service leagues and associations, and also museums that commemorate and honour the contributions made by servicemen and women is one very big part of the relationships-based approach to making sure that people stay connected, but mental health for veterans is something that continues to be a very significant health and community issue, particularly for people who are physically remote and living in or around our regional centres. How are we addressing this priority in the context of your portfolio? And I will also be putting this question to other ministers as well, given that it is so significant, given that often for men who have returned from service it is a very confronting challenge to have to take on.

**Mr EREN** — I was actually very pleased to be out at Torquay recently with the RSL. We have just launched a very important program, which is RSL Active, and it is to tackle that very important issue that you have highlighted and mentioned about isolation. There was one particular veteran, a female veteran, that said publicly that she had been at home for two weeks and she had not come out of home except for this day where they have actually connected in that way.

**Ms SHING** — All too common, those stories, unfortunately.

**Mr EREN** — We are trying to entice and attract those veterans that feel that isolation to come out and enjoy life through sport, arts, culture, dance — whatever they may be interested in — and that \$400 000 that we have allocated to the RSL will go a long way to breaking those barriers and the isolation that occurs with new veterans coming back from service.

It is not often that we can say this, but veterans is obviously a bipartisan portfolio, and I was pleased to see the federal government allocate \$37.9 million in their budget to improve access to mental health. Clearly there are issues. Veterans is predominantly a federal jurisdiction, and if it was not for Steve Bracks when he was Premier in 2005 — he said, ‘This is such an important portfolio that we will dedicate a portfolio to veterans’, then other states and territories followed, and we are supplementing the inadequacies sometimes of the federal system — —

**Ms SHING** — Particularly with the veterans museum on Phillip Island.

**Mr EREN** — Correct. It has proven to be the best decision previous Labor governments have made. So there is a fair bit of work being done in relation to treating those veterans that have severe cases of depression, PTSD and psychological or mental illness. So we are very much at the ministerial round table. We actually look at it as a state government to see if there are things where we can partner up with the federal government in certain ways in terms of the veterans homelessness issue.

**Ms SHING** — Is there an appetite for that from the federal government?

**Mr EREN** — Absolutely, there was. I must admit that meeting was the first of its kind. So now the federal government do want to partner up with us in terms of homelessness.

**Mr MORRIS** — On BP3, page 310, but in particular the veterans employment issue, the government committed I think late last year to employing up to 250 veterans in the public service. How many have been employed in the public sector so far?

**Mr EREN** — Look, this is obviously an area that we have just embarked upon to ensure that we get this right in terms of the training needs and the skill sets that are required and what skill sets exist out there and who is actually coming forward and making application to this very important program. Look, I have got no doubts that obviously once we get to the fundamentals of using the tracking process through careers.vic.gov, and once they actually make application, once they actually go on our site and say that they are interested, we will be straight onto it.

**Mr MORRIS** — Have there been any so far since the announcement?

**Mr EREN** — Well, not that we know of at this point in time, but it is just one of those really tough situations. It is there, David. You know, it is actually there for when a veteran wants to come on board. When they want to take advantage of this very important policy, they just need to go online and basically make certain applications, and then we will track them and we will follow on with that very important commitment that we have made.

**Mr MORRIS** — So just trying to get a handle on the numbers, given that there is not much more than a month to go, I assume the number is not going to increase this financial year, but how many do you expect to employ next financial year?

**Mr EREN** — Because this has never been done before in the state's history, that is hard to say, and because of the nature of the cohort or the community that we are talking about, it is really hard to say. But what I can say is the money is there; all of the relevant ex-service organisations that are involved with this very important policy are working very hard to identify, to be the conduit I suppose, to make applications to actually encourage them to come out and go through the process of applying for these positions. It is hard to quantify because there is no baseline data. But what we do expect is 50 to apply in the next year or so. That is on our estimation. On the hits that we are getting and so on and so forth through our tracking mechanisms, we estimate there will be about 50 within the year.

**Mr MORRIS** — Yes, so that is obviously the target in the 2017–18 budget papers. What sort of a time frame is the 250 over?

**Mr EREN** — Basically it is over the four years. We have allocated some \$900 000 towards it.

**Mr MORRIS** — Obviously the forward estimates target is not published, but — —

**Mr EREN** — Over four years.

**Mr MORRIS** — So if we are starting with 50 next year, then it might move up to 60 the year after, and that sort of thing?

**Mr EREN** — Yes, basically.

**Mr MORRIS** — Ms Bourke is nodding. Is that the sort of trajectory you would see it going? I am happy to address that question directly if that helps.

**Ms BOURKE** — Yes.

**Mr MORRIS** — Yes. So that sort of trajectory?

**Ms BOURKE** — Correct.

**Mr MORRIS** — I am waving my hand, which is not helpful for Hansard. So 50, 60, 70 — of that order?

**Ms BOURKE** — Correct.

**Mr T. SMITH** — Minister, referring to BP3, page 310, and the issue of community safety at dawn services, can you identify in the budget any funding to support safety at Anzac Day dawn services throughout Victoria over the forward estimates?

**Mr EREN** — That is a matter obviously about law enforcement agencies in terms of the cooperation that exists with both federal and state law enforcement agencies, and that is a case whereby they decide if extra police are needed if intelligence comes in, depending upon what that intelligence is, so we would very much be looking at that intelligence from the police. And pretty much the law enforcement side of it would be within the purview of the Minister for Police. Clearly we do have instances where, if we as a government get intelligence that there needs to be more police and we need to be more vigilant, accordingly that would be a matter for the government's law enforcement agencies.

**Mr T. SMITH** — Local government authorities claim that since rate capping they are unable to continue to invest in many community activities —

**Ms WARD** — On a point of order, which local authority?

**Mr T. SMITH** — particularly dawn services in places like Torquay and Mount Macedon, which are particularly well attended, costing in excess of \$50 000. What is the government doing to support these local areas to stage dawn services in a rate capping environment?

**Ms SHING** — Have we got a source for this claim?

**The CHAIR** — Order! Mr Smith, is there a source that you can provide?

**Mr MORRIS** — That is the advice we are getting from — —

**Mr T. SMITH** — They are very well attended. They are the biggest two dawn services outside of the CBD.

**The CHAIR** — So who from Torquay and Macedon is providing this advice? Is it the local RSL, or is it the council?

**Mr T. SMITH** — I said 'in excess of 50 grand'; I did not put a figure on it.

**The CHAIR** — I am just asking who.

**Mr MORRIS** — Chair, there is no tradition or precedent to force the opposition to disclose sources.

**The CHAIR** — Okay, sorry. I was just seeking some context.

**Mr MORRIS** — I am sure the minister is aware of the issue. It is a legitimate question.

**The CHAIR** — I never suggested it was not a legitimate question. I was just trying to seek some advice as to where this was coming from. I am happy for the question to stand.

**Mr EREN** — Can I just say obviously the rate capping issue is outside my purview in that I cannot make any determinations on that. That is not my portfolio. But what I can talk about is that we do provide some moneys to the RSL to conduct their events as they see fit across the state, where they want to utilise that money. We have allocated some \$80 000 annually in the 16–17 to 19–20 budgets to the RSL to help support the delivery of Anzac Day activities such as the provisions of screens, traffic management services, lighting, public toilets and other things they need to conduct their events.

Obviously leading up to 2015, the 100th anniversary, there was a real peak in terms of the interest and the people attending services right throughout Victoria. The shrine had a million people come to it. Every service across the state was really, really peaking in terms of the interest of those people. So — —

**Mr T. SMITH** — I will just cut you off there, Minister, because I want one more question answered. I attended on 7 May the 75th anniversary of the Battle of the Coral Sea on behalf of Matthew Guy. My colleague Tim McCurdy attended the following day the Victory in Europe Day at the shrine, but there was no representative from the government. Why not?

**Mr EREN** — I think that is a really low blow. That really is a low blow, Mr Smith, even for you, where you scrape the bottom of the barrel, crawling around the gutter. You really do. That is a low — —

**Mr T. SMITH** — Do you guys not work on Sundays or something?

**Mr EREN** — The veterans council was — —

**Members interjecting.**

**Mr EREN** — Anyway, if you want to stoop down that low in relation to what you attend and what you do not attend, can I tell you that I do not see you at every single event either, Mr Smith.

**The CHAIR** — Order! Time has expired. I as Chair want to place on the record the fact that this portfolio area has traditionally been one of bipartisan support, and I think that to make suggestions that because members of the government may not have been able to attend for a variety of reasons is not appropriate.

I thank the Minister for Veterans, the Honourable John Eren, MP, and Ms Bourke for their attendance. The committee will follow up on any questions taken on notice in writing. Ms Pennicuik or Ms Patten may have provided some questions. The response answering the questions in full should be provided in writing within 10 working days of the committee's request.

**Committee adjourned.**