

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the 2026–27 Budget Estimates

Melbourne – Wednesday 20 May 2026

MEMBERS

Sarah Connolly – Chair

John Pesutto – Deputy Chair

Jade Benham

Michael Galea

Mathew Hilakari

Lauren Kathage

Aiv Puglielli

Richard Riordan

Meng Heang Tak

WITNESSES

Ros Spence MP, Minister for Community Sport; and

Georgina McCann, Deputy Secretary, Sport and Experience Economy,

Natalie Phillips, Executive Director, Community Sport and Recreation, and

Philip Saikaly, Lead Director, Community Sports Infrastructure, Department of Jobs, Skills, Industry and Regions.

The CHAIR: I declare open this hearing of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee, and I ask that mobile telephones please be turned to silent.

On behalf of the Parliament, the committee is conducting this Inquiry into the 2026–27 Budget Estimates. The committee's aim is to scrutinise public administration and finance to improve outcomes for the Victorian community.

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

All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard, and it is broadcast live on the Parliament's website. The broadcast includes automated captioning. Members and witnesses should be aware that all microphones are live during the hearings, and anything you say, even if you say it quietly, can be picked up and captioned.

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

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

I welcome the Minister for Community Sport, the Honourable Ros Spence, as well as officials from DJSIR. Minister, I invite you to make an opening statement or presentation of no more than 5 minutes, after which time committee members will ask you questions. Your time starts now.

Ros SPENCE: Thank you, Chair. I would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we meet, the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation, and pay my respects to elders past and present.

Visual presentation.

Ros SPENCE: Thank you to the committee for the opportunity to report on the status of the Victorian community sport and active recreation sector.

Next slide. Since 2020 I have had the honour of serving as the Minister for Community Sport, and as we move through 2026 I remain inspired by the unwavering commitment, collaboration and shared sense of purpose that defines our state's sporting community. From players and volunteers to officials and administrators, there is a lot of goodwill in this sector. The community sport and active recreation sector is a major contributor to Victoria's social, cultural, physical and economic wellbeing. More than 4 million Victorian adults take part in some form of physical activity at least once a week, with around half of adults participating at least three times a week. The facilities that our clubs call home are often the central hub for the whole community, particularly in our regional and rural areas. Across the state there are approximately 10,000 facilities. These facilities generate an estimated \$7 billion worth of health, social and economic benefits to Victoria annually, including \$2.6 billion of social benefits. The wider sport and active recreation sector supports an estimated 71,000 full-time jobs, and more than 789,000 Victorians volunteer in sport and active recreation. This includes helping as officials and coaches. I want to take this moment to thank the staff and volunteers who work tirelessly to keep our sector going week in and week out.

The Victorian government has provided significant support over the past year to the sector. We have continued to deliver the Get Active Kids voucher program, which provides payments of up to \$200 to help Victorian

families get their children involved in their favourite sport and recreation activities. More than 250,000 vouchers have been distributed through the program to date, and well over half of voucher recipients reported that they would not have been able to participate without the assistance provided. We have also provided more than \$1.1 million in support through both the sporting club grants program and the Aboriginal sport participation grant program. These programs help grassroots clubs and organisations address barriers to participation, develop safe and sustainable practices and build social and active local communities. Seventy-eight per cent of recipients are located in disadvantaged areas where communities have lower participation rates.

In 2025–26 we continued to help keep Victorian children safe in the water by providing subsidised swimming lessons for more than 16,000 children through the VICSWIM program, which celebrated its 50th anniversary this year. VICSWIM was delivered at around 150 venues, 66 per cent of which were in regional Victoria. Thirty-nine per cent of parents indicated that VICSWIM was the only swimming lessons their child had participated in over the past 12 months, highlighting the importance of this program.

In 2025–26 we invested \$4.5 million to support people with disability to participate, work and volunteer in sport and recreation, particularly in regional Victoria. This includes \$2.8 million through the all-abilities workforce and sector support program and funding for 89 grants valued at \$1.69 million through regional all-abilities participation grants. Of the 141 community sport and recreation infrastructure projects supported in 2025–26, 52 per cent are located in regional Victoria.

Next slide. The 2026–27 budget reflects the Victorian government's continued commitment to supporting Victorians participating in community sport and recreation, providing an additional \$35.9 million in funding. This includes funding to support the continuation of the Local Sports Infrastructure Fund, which will prioritise infrastructure investment in disadvantaged communities and for groups with lower participation rates, as well as continued investment in the popular Get Active Kids voucher program and in Basketball Victoria's high-performance hubs in Ballarat, Bendigo, Broadmeadows, Geelong, Shepparton, Traralgon and Werribee, ensuring that infrastructure investment is complemented by program investment to maximise access to opportunities for more Victorians to enjoy the benefits of sport and recreation. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, Minister. The first 8 minutes of the clock are going to Ms Benham.

Jade BENHAM: Thank you, Chair. Afternoon, Minister. I want to take you to the questionnaire on page 55, I think it is, which talks about the community sports infrastructure and participation initiatives and the \$26.1 million there. How much of that is directed to metropolitan versus regional and rural communities?

Ros SPENCE: I might have to throw to the Deputy Secretary for that one.

Georgina McCANN: Thank you for the question. The \$26.1 million in 2026–27 is made up of funding for the Get Active Kids voucher program. About 30 per cent of that funding goes to regional communities on average throughout the course of the program. Point 3 goes to the basketball hubs, and the minister has just outlined the locations of those basketball hubs. Ten million dollars goes to the Local Sports Infrastructure Fund, so that will depend where those projects are located.

Jade BENHAM: Do you know what proportion is metro versus regional?

Georgina McCANN: Generally it is a 60–40-ish split, but it will depend –

Jade BENHAM: Metro–regional?

Georgina McCANN: Yes, but the other way around.

Jade BENHAM: The other way around. 60–40. Okay.

Georgina McCANN: Generally, but it will depend on the applications we receive. Obviously we prioritise projects in low socio-economic areas as well, so that is always a lens we put over our applications. And then \$12.8 million is remaining for identified projects, and I can come back with the split on those.

Jade BENHAM: Yes, that is fine. Do you take into account also prioritising areas where there might be an identified decline in participation?

Georgina McCANN: Yes. We take into account participation as well, so it is quite a robust process. But it obviously looks at participation outcomes that we are seeking to achieve in those local areas as well as, as I said, where there are barriers to participation, particularly in low-SES areas, so we do take those things into account.

Jade BENHAM: Is the biggest barrier to participation cost?

Georgina McCANN: Well, often it can be lack of access to facilities. Cost can be a barrier, and obviously there are a range of programs that the government delivers that support cost-of-living pressures as well.

Jade BENHAM: I know – I am going to get a bit local for a minute – there are some clubs in Mildura, in town, that actually support the lower socio-economic population with transport. Is that something that this program might be able to help with?

Ros SPENCE: We do not cover transport.

Jade BENHAM: No?

Ros SPENCE: No. But they may be able to access things like the sporting club grants and other grants that then they could offset, and money that they were spending on equipment they could put perhaps towards transport. So there is –

Jade BENHAM: How do they get that though, if they do not need equipment? Is there a way of –

Ros SPENCE: There is equipment, uniforms, volunteer participation.

Jade BENHAM: Yes, it is more about the geography and being able to transport kids particularly to the large geographic area that we have. But that is okay.

Ros SPENCE: That is right. We also prioritise areas that have been affected by bushfire, drought or flood. They are also priority locations.

Jade BENHAM: Yes, which would obviously need that equipment and infrastructure stuff.

Ros SPENCE: Yes, that is right.

Jade BENHAM: Do you know how many children have stopped participating in sport due to barriers such as unaffordability?

Ros SPENCE: I do not think we would have that level of detail. What we have got – and Georgina can try and find it for me – is levels of participation pre and post COVID, and in most cohorts and for most sports it has tracked back up to where it was. And that has been a really keen focus to try and make sure that we do that. There are still a couple of age groups where it has not picked up, and that is not such a worry now but a worry when they go through sport that there will be gaps when it gets to a senior level.

Jade BENHAM: Is that the higher teenage years?

Ros SPENCE: Teenage girls. Yes.

Jade BENHAM: Yes. Like under 15 to under 17- type age groups.

Ros SPENCE: Yes. So participation rates are lower for five- to eight-year-olds, and they think that that is because many sports do not start until there are under-8s, so there is a gap there.

Jade BENHAM: Yes. We know that.

Ros SPENCE: Participation peaks in ages nine to 11. The average national peak is 12 to 14, so we have an earlier peak, and there is no real information as to why that is. Is that about all we have got on here? Yes.

Jade BENHAM: That is okay. Yes, that is fine. Local clubs everywhere – do you have any idea of how many local clubs have folded, merged or reduced programs due to financial constraints and/or participation, or what is forecast?

Ros SPENCE: No, I would not have a number for that. But we do know that more often it is in regional areas where they are having the amalgamations.

Jade BENHAM: Yes, and it is happening. There are clubs and leagues forecasting as soon as two and three years out now that they are going to merge and form super leagues, which makes it difficult. Does the government have a plan to help with this? Because we know that in those regional and rural areas, sporting clubs, footy clubs in particular, and hockey clubs, are the things that keep towns together.

Ros SPENCE: Yes. There are a number of participation programs. Did you want to talk to them, Natalie?

Natalie PHILLIPS: Yes.

Jade BENHAM: How do we sustain them, because it is also the volunteerism, as you –

Ros SPENCE: Well, that is correct.

Jade BENHAM: Yes. The volunteers of the clubs, the adults – and it is a lot, as you would well know. What plan does the government have to sustain regional and rural settings and community sports?

Ros SPENCE: There has been the big Regional Infrastructure Fund. That has provided a lot of infrastructure. But with that, there were also some program-enabling funds for increasing disability access, making it more inclusive. They are happening, so –

Jade BENHAM: That is not going to help clubs remain open, though.

Ros SPENCE: No, but it will encourage players to actually go there, because one of the huge barriers is the facilities.

Jade BENHAM: Accessibility.

Ros SPENCE: I have gone to a number of these, and I will tell you, you would not be wanting your kids there.

Jade BENHAM: No. We have got a court in Mildura in fact, Minister, the Lakers court. In fact thank you for raising that. There was a quote – this is just on funding. The Lakers court is a community court, but it is also part of the VSBA. They got a local quote to completely resurface the court for \$100,000. The VSBA has come back and gone, ‘No, it’s \$400,000.’ Why would it cost the government four times as much as it would cost the school council?

Ros SPENCE: I do not have an answer to that; I do not work with the VSBA. They are –

Jade BENHAM: The math does not math, though, does it?

Ros SPENCE: Well, no, it does not. But that is a really big issue – improving infrastructure. And we know that wherever there are infrastructure improvements across the state, participation does increase. There has been a report done on all of our previous investments and the analysis done of what participation changes there have been, and there are huge female participation increases, and that just makes sense.

Jade BENHAM: So you do not work with the VSBA, but do you know how many schools currently lack basic sporting facilities within their school grounds?

Ros SPENCE: That would be for the Minister for Education, sorry.

Jade BENHAM: Yes, that is okay. No worries. What about how many regional and outer suburban areas lack access to facilities within a reasonable travel distance, depending on what you would call reasonable? It probably differs between –

Philip SAIKALY: Yes, it is different based on where people live.

Jade BENHAM: where you live. I mean, 2 hours is reasonable for me, but it would not be for the Member for Hawthorn, I suspect.

Philip SAIKALY: That is right. And we are very reliant, given the ownership of facilities rests with local government, for local councils to invest in partnership with the state to bring those facilities forward and ensure the programs that the clubs and communities are running are accessible and cater for diverse communities as well.

Jade BENHAM: But you have not got a list of how many, or any targets where, facilities need improvement?

The CHAIR: We will go to Mr Hilakari.

Mathew HILAKARI: Thank you, Minister. Thank you, officials, for your attendance this afternoon. Minister, I might take you to BP3, page 62, 'Community sports infrastructure and participation initiatives'. I have certainly seen you in my local community and been part of the building of some of this local infrastructure; for me, it was soccer fields and some of the facilities for change rooms et cetera, which was fantastic. We do sometimes hear a lot about soccer and cricket and basketball, those ones, but I am always interested to hear of the breadth of community sport that is available. I am keen to understand what we are supporting as a government.

Ros SPENCE: Thank you, Mr Hilakari. Can I thank you for that question. If I recall from previous PAEC hearings, you have had a keen interest in community sport and participation, so thank you, and thank you for having me at your community to see some of the works that are happening in person. We know that community sport infrastructure is really multifaceted. It can comprise a number of different things, and it is delivered through different contexts. Our most common and popular method is the highly competitive Local Sports Infrastructure Fund, which I am very pleased to say is supported again in this year's budget. Last round was very popular, and it included funding through three streams. I will go through those and give you an idea of some of the things that are funded in each of those streams.

The three streams were community facilities, community sports lighting and planning. The community facilities stream this time supported projects like the Colac bike path construction in Polwarth – I am sure that Mr Riordan is aware of that one – which was supported to the maximum amount of \$500,000. That project is going to deliver construction of a bike park at Elliminyt Recreation Reserve, featuring an asphalt bike pump, all-weather bike jump areas, landscaping, park furniture and signage.

Mathew HILAKARI: Mr Riordan would be into the bike jumps, wouldn't he?

Ros SPENCE: He is going to love it.

Mathew HILAKARI: He is going to be all over it.

Richard RIORDAN: The local kids had made their own, but we deemed it, in this modern world, too unsafe.

Mathew HILAKARI: That is a matter for the local member, I would have thought, to deal with.

Ros SPENCE: The community sports lighting stream is really popular as well. That is an important one, because facilities with lights can be used later into the night and the season, and that means that you are able to get more players out on the ground.

Mathew HILAKARI: My local soccer club talked to me about – I did not know a lot about lumens beforehand.

Ros SPENCE: There you go.

Mathew HILAKARI: But making sure they are available is hugely problematic if you cannot. Local council finally stepped in and did their job there.

Ros SPENCE: An example of a project that was supported this time around was the Timboon Recreation Reserve multipurpose court lighting project.

Mathew HILAKARI: Mr Riordan again – what an advocate.

Richard RIORDAN: They needed the government funding. The government banned them having campers there, so they no longer have an income stream to look after them.

Mathew HILAKARI: There is a lot of banning going on in Mr Riordan's patch, but anyway, continue on, Minister.

Ros SPENCE: This project was supported with almost \$97,000, and it is a really important project, again, because of the impact that the bushfires have had on that local community. The reserve is used by community members as well as the Timboon P-12 School, and that will deliver really significant benefits for both netball and tennis.

The planning stream is the final one, and that one is really crucial for making sure that projects and future visions get to the best possible start. Having an idea is great, but without the dedicated design works, councils cannot have the confidence that it will do what they want it to do when it comes off the page and into reality, so we need to make sure that we have good planning works happening right across the state.

The 2025–26 Local Sports Infrastructure Fund supported projects like – and you would never guess where it is – the Corangamite shire recreation and open space strategy.

Richard RIORDAN: Can I just say, Minister, that I am an excellent local member, and the work I have put in to getting these various funds out of you is exemplary – and make that a record, Chair. The Parliament will note the hard work of the Member for Polwarth that has singlehandedly drained community sport for the benefit of his own region.

The CHAIR: We will make sure that makes the report, Mr Riordan.

Ros SPENCE: That project is receiving \$40,000, and that is going to deliver the development of that council's 10-year strategic document.

Mathew HILAKARI: I am going to be diverting you down the Princes. Every time you are driving towards Torquay, I am going to be stopping you on the freeway and bringing you to Point Cook.

John PESUTTO: Sorry, point of order – that is the 'Riordan Freeway'.

Mathew HILAKARI: Sorry – yes, by the sounds of it.

Ros SPENCE: That project will help council meet its current and future sport, recreation and open space needs, and it is very important that we keep that funding. We also have individual budget projects such as the Mildura Lawn Tennis Club upgrades project, which will provide up to \$250,000 towards the club to deliver important works there that will keep it running well into the future. And it would be remiss of me not to mention the budget funding of up to \$250,000 towards the delivery of upgrades at Mavis Hutter Reserve in Clarinda, and I know that the member is very pleased with that. I know that all of these works will make a huge difference to the clubs there as well.

Mathew HILAKARI: Now, there are obviously enormous community benefits. I have not seen the members for Polwarth and Mildura so excited as this session to talk about some of the community sports benefits there. Community benefits more broadly, can you talk about maybe not just for those communities?

Ros SPENCE: Sure. Thank you again for the question. There are many benefits that arise from community sport infrastructure investment, and the first is obviously to local players. As a government, we want to encourage and enable people to get active as the physical and the mental health benefits that flow from that are well understood and recognised, but we absolutely support initiatives that do promote and result in good physical and mental health outcomes. However, you also have to make it possible to participate, and this is what I was speaking with the member for Mildura about. Building appropriate, inclusive, fit-for-purpose facilities really is the first step towards engaging more people in sport and active recreation and having more

people experience those benefits. So upgrading and building these facilities as appropriate also contributes to social cohesion. Sports clubs are often the heart of a community, and this multiplies when you are talking about regional clubs and rural areas of Victoria. That means that clubs have a tremendous ability to shape the perception about exactly who is welcome and who is not, for better or for worse.

Many of the facilities throughout Victoria are decades old, almost like a living time capsule. They are very loved, very cherished, but not very fit for purpose or meeting today's expectations or needs. It is almost like a template throughout the state with narrow wooden benches, ratty old carpet tiles, communal shower facilities with cracked tiles. They are not typically accessible for anyone with mobility needs. They are not particularly welcoming to women or families – and for a lot of men either, for that matter. By building better facilities that have universal design principles at the front of consideration from the beginning, the clubs are then able to send a message to anyone who comes, whether it is their home or away team, whether it is umpires or officials. They get a message that they are welcome and included in that space. So by entrenching inclusion in design, we make it easier for clubs to be welcoming spaces for everyone.

We are also prioritising environmentally sustainable design principles now as well, which ultimately contributes to long-term sustainability. Things like LED lighting and reclaimed water mean that clubs will have lower water bills and be able to operate long into the future and factoring in the local conditions that they find themselves in. For example, the 2025–26 Local Sports Infrastructure Fund included over \$163,000 towards the Wilsons Reserve sports field LED floodlight upgrade in Bulleen. I am sure that Mr Galea is happy about that. This will deliver the 100-lux lighting to meet the requirements for evening soccer training and matches, and that also means lower power bills, lower emissions, lights that are easier to replace and longer hours for community use. Finally, these projects mean jobs and local investment. Generally speaking, our projects are delivered by partners such as local councils. Many of these have local procurement policies in place, which these projects also abide by, and that means that local workers are delivering local jobs for the benefit of the local community.

Mathew HILAKARI: These are some terrific projects. I know for the community I represent, the Laverton Football Club, just over 100 years old, their clubrooms had not seen a lick of paint in 40 years until we came along and entirely funded extra change rooms and refurbishing that whole club so it is a usable space again. But it takes me to the point of monitoring outcomes. How do we make sure that the outcomes that we seek and set out to do with important government-funded projects – how do we make sure that we actually do that monitoring and we demonstrate that positive impact?

Ros SPENCE: Thank you again. This really is an important aspect. If we are going to make these big investments, we need to monitor and ensure that they are having the benefit that we seek. The short answer for you is yes, we do engage in ongoing monitoring of the projects. That is part of our regular milestone reporting, which is how we are able to gauge the impact that our investments are making. We are really proud of the growth that clubs and communities see. We most recently published the *Community Sports Infrastructure 2024 Outcomes Statement*, which took multiple years of data from 330 projects and looked at the impact our investments have had. For instance, we know that projects in regional Victoria generally see a 17 per cent increase in usage, and in metropolitan projects they generally see a 15 per cent increase in usage. When you have got hundreds of players that adds up. They very much become a drawcard. Certainly the positive feedback that I get when I go to completed projects is they say, 'This is a terrible problem to have' –

Mathew HILAKARI: This is why we are here.

Ros SPENCE: That is right. It is also how we know that when we invest in these local projects the biggest beneficiaries are girls, and junior girls' participation rates rose amongst all user groups, seeing an increase of about 19 per cent, so they are really positive outcomes.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Hilakari.

Mathew HILAKARI: I had so many more questions.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you, Chair. To start us off, I am on budget paper 3, page 62. The Upfield Soccer Club currently does not have separate changing rooms for women and girls, and it is creating a barrier to equitable participation at the local club. I understand the club has already lost its under-15 girls team to other clubs with appropriate facilities. Minister, is there any funding in the budget that can support fit-for-purpose women's changing facilities at this club to promote participation in local sport?

Ros SPENCE: I am very familiar with the Upfield club. I have visited there many times, and I know that they do an absolutely outstanding job. It is a much-loved facility that they have, but as you rightly say, it is lacking when it comes to those proper women and girls change rooms. I have met out there with the local council also on a couple of times, because our Local Sports Infrastructure Fund generally requires an application to be made by the local council, and that would be the appropriate fund for them to seek funding through. We have got council to do some initial planning work. The priority for the club was getting the ovals realigned on their main oval, getting the two pitches realigned. Their second priority is the change rooms. The reason they prioritised it like that is simply cost and the stage at where Hume are in their planning works. Hume believe that they can do the oval. They were waiting for their facilities strategy to be complete before they determined whether or not it would go in their current year budget. I have not seen it in their current year budget, and it has to be council led. I will keep working with the club. I will keep working with council. There is a lot of really good work that they do, and they have been around for quite a while now. They really encourage a lot of our multicultural members to join. They are very well supported, and they are very welcome there. The girls are also amazing. Go and see the girls out there. They are just superstars. I am pretty keen to make sure that they have the facilities that they deserve.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. On multicultural communities, one of the many ways that people find shared interests and connect across cultures is community sport. Shouting out Annisa Li Zhang, Aaron Qin and the team at Melbourne Loong Football Club for the work they do in this space. We do, however, hear instances in the community of racial abuse. It does go on. Minister, what work is being undertaken to address racism in community sport settings?

Ros SPENCE: Thank you. There is work going on, I am pleased to let you know. One that comes to mind, while I try to find my notes, is some anti-racism strategy work that is being done by the Centre for Multicultural Youth, CMY, as well as Vicsport – and is it seven other sports?

Georgina McCANN: Yes, I think so.

Ros SPENCE: Seven other sports. They are working across their respective sports to put together strategies that they can then roll out wider.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Puglielli. Minister and officials, thank you very much for appearing before the committee today. The committee will follow up on any questions taken on notice in writing, and responses are required within five working days of the committee's request. The committee will take a very short break before beginning its consideration of the portfolio of First Nations at 3:25 pm. I declare this hearing adjourned.

Witnesses withdrew.