

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 First Peoples; and

Terry Garwood, Deputy Secretary, First Peoples–State Relations, and

Shen Narayanasamy, State Lead, Treaty, Department of Premier and Cabinet.

The CHAIR: I declare open this hearing of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee. 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, anything you say or that is repeated outside this hearing may not be protected by this privilege.

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

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

Ros SPENCE: Thank you, Chair. Thank you to the committee for the opportunity to talk about the First Peoples portfolio. I would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the lands we are meeting on, the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation, and I pay my respects to elders past and present and extend that respect to Aboriginal people in the room.

Visual presentation.

Ros SPENCE: The government has continued to invest in supporting Aboriginal Victorians in the 2026–27 state budget with an investment of \$19.3 million over two years in the First Peoples portfolio. This investment will support the continued protection of Aboriginal cultural heritage, sustainable and self-governing Aboriginal trusts and the response to the Yoorrook Justice Commission recommendations.

Funding is provided to support the delivery and administration of Victoria’s Aboriginal cultural heritage system; to meet statutory obligations, enable proactive identification and protection of Victoria’s Aboriginal cultural heritage, including management of the Aboriginal cultural heritage register; and to promote protection of Aboriginal cultural heritage consistent with the *Aboriginal Heritage Act 2006*. The Act’s objectives are underpinned by the principle of self-determination and include recognition of Aboriginal people as the primary guardians, keepers and knowledge holders of their cultural heritage. The funding provided in this year’s budget will ensure that Victoria’s Aboriginal cultural heritage management system provides strong protections for Aboriginal cultural heritage and decision-making for traditional owners while ensuring land users and developers have clear processes to follow to assess and manage the risks within their projects. Activities this year have included more than a thousand Aboriginal places and objects registered in the Victorian Aboriginal heritage register – more than 2700 applications for advice from the Victorian Aboriginal register have been processed, and 36 cultural heritage management plans, five cultural heritage permits and 29 preliminary Aboriginal heritage tests have been certified – and 12 capacity-building activities provided to traditional owners in aspects of the Aboriginal cultural heritage management system.

Truth-telling is a critical component of Victoria’s treaty. Without understanding our history, we cannot understand how inequality was created and continues. Funding in this year’s budget continues the government’s commitment to the formal truth-telling process to facilitate a whole-of-government response to the Yoorrook Justice Commission’s *Yoorrook for Transformation* report and the implementation of recommendations from the commission’s third interim report. The commission recommendations will continue to inform Statewide Treaty implementation and future traditional owner treaties consistent with the Treaty

Negotiation Framework and *Statewide Treaty Act*. Key outcomes of the Statewide Treaty will support truth-telling beyond the conclusion of the commission's formal inquiry.

Funding is also provided to support essential services at the Framlingham and Lake Tyers Aboriginal trusts, including to support delivery of municipal and essential services, and maintain core operations at Framlingham and Lake Tyers Aboriginal trusts consistent with statutory obligations under the *Aboriginal Lands Act 1970*.

In the past 12 months funding has been used to progress a well-supported and very well planned treaty process, the details of which are published annually in the Victorian government's treaty report. Key achievements in 2025–26 include the Victorian government having reached a negotiated agreement on the first Statewide Treaty with the First Peoples' Assembly in September 2025. This was followed by passage of the *Statewide Treaty Act 2025*. On 9 December 2025 Premier Jacinta Allan delivered a formal apology to the First Peoples in the Victorian Parliament. This marked an important step towards building a shared understanding of our history, addressing the impacts of historic injustice upon First Peoples since colonisation and ultimately reaffirming the state's commitment to truth, justice and self-determination, with the Statewide Treaty having commenced on 12 December 2025. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, Minister. The first 8 minutes go to Ms Benham.

Jade BENHAM: Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon, Minister, again, and officials. I want to draw your attention to budget paper 5, page 218. It is right down the bottom. For the 2026–27 financial year, what is the aggregate whole-of-government cost for treaty-related activities, but not limited to the Treaty Authority, treaty-established bodies or truth-telling processes. Have you got a breakdown of those expenditures?

Ros SPENCE: Yes, I will pass to the Deputy Secretary.

Terry GARWOOD: I can give you that. Let us have a look. As you know from looking at the budget papers, there is a special appropriation for the Treaty Authority, which is \$20.3 million; there is a special appropriation for Gellung Warl, which is outlined, I think, in the back of BP5 – I will just go to that for you for a moment; and in budget paper 5, page 218 you will see \$44.755 million, which is made up of \$23 million for operating for Gellung Warl and \$20.9 million in capital.

Jade BENHAM: Yes, so what is the aggregate?

Terry GARWOOD: Taking all of that in together there is – I am just trying to get it to all add up, basically – \$44 million, plus funding for the transition of the First Peoples' Assembly of about \$27 million. There is a treaty team with DPC of about \$7 million, plus the Treaty Authority of about \$20 million. So that would total around about \$98 million or thereabouts.

Jade BENHAM: \$98 million. Yes, and does that include the advisory structures and all the associated admin? That is the aggregated whole cost to government?

Terry GARWOOD: That is the aggregated whole. As you know, under the Gellung Warl it has got those three functions. It has got the First Peoples' Assembly, it has got Nginma Ngainga Wara and it has got Nyerna Yoorrook Telkuna. So the first one is the representative body, the second one is the independent accountability mechanism monitoring the government's expenditure and the third one relates to ongoing local truth-telling.

Jade BENHAM: Okay.

Terry GARWOOD: But all of those functions sit within this special appropriation for Gellung Warl.

Jade BENHAM: Okay. What proportion of the treaty-related expenditure in 2026–27 relates to – there are four points here – staff salaries; executive and board remuneration; consultants, legal and advisory services; and corporate overheads such as property, IT and communications?

Terry GARWOOD: For who? For which –

Jade BENHAM: Well, it says, 'Treaty-related expenditure.' The Treaty Authority, I am guessing.

Terry GARWOOD: Yes. Because they are both independent bodies, they have their own decision-making about the allocation of resources.

Jade BENHAM: How it is broken down?

Terry GARWOOD: Yes, how it is all broken down. They can make their own decisions. The Treaty Authority, as you can see in the special appropriations on page 218 of BP5, has a special appropriation for 2026–27 of \$20.3 million, which, I think, if I remember rightly in the legislation, is actually capped at that amount ongoing. And then if you look at the treaty Act, which I just happen to have here, you will see funding arrangements for Gellung Warl and you will see that in 2026–27 there is \$23.805 million and then there is capital funding of \$20.950 million. But you do not see a break-up of it, because that is a matter for –

Jade BENHAM: It goes to the authority?

Terry GARWOOD: Yes, to the authority. Sorry, not the authority, to Gellung Warl.

Jade BENHAM: To Gellung Warl, thank you.

Terry GARWOOD: The authority is a separate organisation body. The Treaty Authority is the independent umpire that monitors the negotiations. It is quite separate from Gellung Warl and it is separate from state government.

Jade BENHAM: Great. What about the activity across departments? Is that included in that aggregate figure as far as health and education? I know Clontarf academy – a great foundation, huge shout-out to them – get a very small amount. Does that aggregate include all of those extra services across departments?

Terry GARWOOD: No. There are a range of what we would call Closing the Gap initiatives –

Jade BENHAM: We are coming to that.

Terry GARWOOD: Yes. With most of those you will see the initiatives are actually, if you like, outlined in BP3, pages 10, 11 and 12. If you look at those various levels of expenditure that are outlined in the output initiatives – for example, if I go to each of those and I just work my way through them – you can see that it talks here about \$5.1 million over two years for Aboriginal self-determination, falling within the responsibility of the Minister for Children:

Funding is provided to support continued expansion of the Community Protecting Boorais –
which are children –

... which allows Aboriginal-led investigation of Child Protection reports.

That has got \$5.1 million over two years, which you will see in BP3. I should just mention that goes to addressing Closing the Gap target 12 on out-of-home care. Then if you look at another one of the initiatives, there is \$2.4 million over four years for improving outcomes for First Nations learners. This falls within the responsibility of the Minister for Education. That is addressing target 5, increasing year 12 attainment.

Jade BENHAM: Sorry, can we talk about the education? What was the figure related to education?

Terry GARWOOD: Well, you will see it. I will just see if I can pick it up here. You will see ‘Improving outcomes for First Nations learners’, and then if you go down below that in the pages below to ‘Improving outcomes for First Nations learners’, on page 11 of BP3 it says:

Funding is provided to continue the First Nations’ Curriculum Clusters Project to support the teaching of First Nations’ histories, cultures and perspectives ...

I should say that that is in the Department of Education.

Jade BENHAM: So does that have further cost to the Department of Education, or is that in –

Terry GARWOOD: It is a budget initiative.

Jade BENHAM: It is a budget initiative, as that, so there is no additional cost apart from that.

Terry GARWOOD: No.

Jade BENHAM: Okay.

Terry GARWOOD: But all of these are budget initiatives. I can continue to go through them. You can see here as well –

Jade BENHAM: No, that is all right. I have got 1 minute left, and I have got some on Closing the Gap.

Terry GARWOOD: Sorry.

Jade BENHAM: That is okay. I want to talk about cultural heritage for a moment. What is the average wait time to complete a cultural heritage management plan?

Terry GARWOOD: Well, it depends on the nature and complexity of the project that is being addressed.

Jade BENHAM: Is there an average, though?

Terry GARWOOD: I will get to that in a moment. Firstly, there are about 40,000 to 50,000 planning permit applications every year, and around about 600 or 700 of those are subject to CHMPs. It just depends. Each year it depends on the amount of development et cetera. So they are around about 1 per cent.

Jade BENHAM: Not up our way.

Terry GARWOOD: Well, it is thereabouts. Depending on the nature and complexity of the project, it will give you a sense of the time it will take. For relatively straightforward projects it might take only three months.

Jade BENHAM: Are there any parameters around how long it should take for each? They are not tiered? There are no parameters? There are no guidelines?

Terry GARWOOD: No, there are not particular timeframes or tiers.

Jade BENHAM: It is just open.

Terry GARWOOD: Well, it is not open in the sense there are requirements in legislation for what has to be done, and that is subject to negotiations with a project proponent, which could be the government or could be a private developer. They then need to do a CHMP. They usually –

The CHAIR: Mr Garwood, I hate to cut you off, I really do. Ms Benham has been waiting for me to do it.

Terry GARWOOD: I was just on a roll.

The CHAIR: I am really loath to do it.

Jade BENHAM: I know. We could talk about it for a long time.

The CHAIR: We are going on to Mr Tak.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you, Chair, Minister, officials. Minister, thanks for your presentation. I take you to budget paper 3, pages 10 and 11, which outlines funding initiatives within the First Peoples portfolio which will help to support First Peoples in Victoria – and indeed all of Victoria – and I would like to raise that with you. In particular the first item relates to Aboriginal cultural heritage protection. As you already noted in your presentation and also are acutely aware of, the Victorian government is very committed to traditional owner engagement and cultural heritage management already. Can you tell us a bit more about how the government supports the ongoing work around Aboriginal cultural heritage protection and how that will be continued?

Ros SPENCE: Thank you, Mr Tak, for your question. You are right, the Victorian government is committed to ensuring Aboriginal cultural heritage is protected for all Victorians. Victoria's Aboriginal cultural heritage system was established under the *Aboriginal Heritage Act 2006* and it incorporates regulatory, enforcement and approval processes designed to protect Victoria's Aboriginal cultural heritage. When we talk about Aboriginal cultural heritage, we are talking about hugely significant places that are tens of thousands of

years old, rock art, freshwater middens, ceremonial rings, scar trees and sacred sites, including burial sites, places that remain culturally significant for all Victorians today. This is heritage which represents the oldest continuing cultures in the world, with unbroken connection to culture over tens of thousands of years. That is why Aboriginal places are protected during development activities in Victoria through the existing cultural heritage management plan system. This system ensures that cultural heritage is properly assessed before developments are approved and provides developers with timely and efficient ways of dealing with Aboriginal objects that may, for example, be unexpectedly uncovered. We are continuing to invest in cultural heritage management with an investment of \$5.7 million through the 2026–27 budget to continue the delivery and administration of the Aboriginal cultural heritage management system and continue the implementation of the reform and redesign work for the cultural heritage management system.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you, Minister. It certainly sounds like there is some important work going on currently, and that funding through the 2025–26 state budget will support these continued efforts. The descriptions also outlined in budget paper 3 on page 10 describe strengthening the regulatory functions and improving efficiency of the cultural heritage process, which you also just made reference to. Minister, once again, can you speak to what this improvement entails and why government is investing in upgrades to the system?

Ros SPENCE: Thank you again for the question. As I referenced in my earlier response to the substantive question, Victoria's Aboriginal cultural heritage system was established under the *Aboriginal Heritage Act 2006*. To ensure the system is evolving with the rapidly changing land use in Victoria as demand for housing increases and the state transitions towards renewable energy, DPC undertook an internal review of the cultural heritage management plan process throughout 2024–25. This review identified areas where improvements could be made to enhance the timelines and cost-efficiency for infrastructure projects that require cultural heritage management plans. I am sure that the Member for Mildura will also be interested in this information, I think that is where she was getting to when her time expired. DPC is now leading the package of reforms in response to the review, while simultaneously ensuring traditional owners continue to lead the most effective Aboriginal heritage protection system in the country. Key initiatives coming out of this include, firstly, further investment in the strategic Aboriginal heritage assessment mapping program, including the launch of an online mapping platform showing areas of likely cultural heritage significance to support strategic planning. The second initiative is the piloting of a new cultural heritage management plan system facilitator. That will be a role within government designed to provide guidance and assistance for developers navigating the cultural heritage system. And thirdly, the development of new process guidelines on cultural heritage management plans that promote greater predictability and certainty on processes, standards and timelines. These will be developed in close collaboration with traditional owners, project sponsors and heritage advisers. This package is part of a range of changes across government to ensure that Victoria's planning and heritage protection systems are supporting the development industry to meet the state's growing housing needs, and these initiatives will support the streamlining of processes, deliver cost savings and ensure Aboriginal cultural heritage continues to be protected for all Victorians.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you, Minister. I refer to the same budget paper 3 on pages 10 and 11 and also to your presentation. There is a further initiative to support Victoria's First Peoples through funding for the Framlingham and Lake Tyers Aboriginal trusts. Minister, can you tell us what this funding will do and how it will assist residents of this trust?

Ros SPENCE: Thank you, and I welcome this question also. As you have mentioned, this funding supports Framlingham trust, which is located near Warrnambool in south-west Victoria, and Lake Tyers trust, located near Lakes Entrance in East Gippsland. Framlingham comprises 16 houses and a health clinic, and Lake Tyers comprises 44 houses and a health clinic. Funding of \$7.6 million over two years is in this budget, and that will ensure that residents continue to have access to housing, health clinics, reliable municipal services and essential community infrastructure. This is consistent with statutory obligations under the *Aboriginal Lands Act 1970*, and it contributes to the Victorian government meeting its obligations under target 9b of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, which requires that all households within discrete Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities receive essential services that meet or exceed the relevant jurisdictional standard by 2031.

Beyond the funding in this budget, the government has supported a number of vital infrastructure projects at Framlingham and Lake Tyers, with investment to deliver wastewater infrastructure at Framlingham and critical jetty infrastructure upgrades at Lake Tyers. The jetty upgrade works at Lake Tyers are now complete, with the

new jetty enhancing community safety as an additional vital escape point in the event of a bushfire, so that is really important infrastructure for that community. The Framlingham wastewater project is underway at the moment, but that is also nearing completion, and that will provide a very important piece of community infrastructure for that community.

Meng Heang TAK: There is a lot of work that has been carried out. Minister, once again I refer to the same budget paper 3. Pages 10 to 11 speak to the funding for scoping and implementation of recommendations from the third Yoorrook Justice Commission report, *Yoorrook for Transformation*. Minister, can you tell us more about this and the commission's work to date?

Ros SPENCE: Thank you. Again, I welcome this question. The Victorian government does remain committed to ongoing truth-telling and treaty as a way to build a shared future for all Victorians. The Yoorrook Justice Commission, which we will just refer to as the commission, was established in May 2021 as Australia's first formal truth-telling inquiry into the historic and contemporary injustices experienced by First Peoples. The commission had a broad mandate to hear, record and address the truths about First Peoples' experiences of injustice in Victoria since colonisation. Over its four-year term the commission investigated First Peoples' experiences of injustice in child protection, criminal justice, land, education, health, housing, economic prosperity, political life and access to records.

The Yoorrook Justice Commission has delivered three reports to date. The first report, *Yoorrook with Purpose*, was delivered in June 2022 and made two recommendations relating to the commission's operation and administration. Both of these recommendations have been acquitted. The second report, *Yoorrook for Justice*, was delivered in August 2023, and it made 46 recommendations for reform to the criminal justice and child protection systems. The government provided an initial response in April 2024, and an implementation progress report was released in October 2024. The third report, *Yoorrook for Transformation*, was delivered in June 2025, and it made 100 recommendations, with recommendations relating to land, education, health, housing, economic prosperity, political life and access to records. The Victorian government has provided a response to all recommendations from the commission's first two interim reports and will, in the near future, respond to the recommendations from the commission's third interim report, *Yoorrook for Transformation*. This budget provides \$6 million over two years to support the implementation of recommendations from the commission's third report. Everyone deserves to be able to share their truth, particularly our First Peoples, and it is something that many Victorians understand and support.

As I conclude my response, I would just like to share with the committee that former Yoorrook justice commissioner Travis Lovett is currently doing a Walk for Truth from Melbourne to Canberra – 800 kilometres – calling for the Commonwealth government to commit to a truth-telling process with First Peoples similar to what we have.

The CHAIR: Very good. We are going to Mr Puglielli.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon. Minister, generations on generations have advocated for treaty. We now have seen the treaty Bill pass the Parliament, and we have heard from so many First Nations people about how important this is and what it means for communities, for elders and for future generations. We are in a budget estimates process right now, so I ask: in addition to the transformative social and cultural importance of treaty, what does it represent for our state economically? What economically is treaty putting into practice?

Ros SPENCE: I would refer you to the earlier conversation that we were having about Closing the Gap initiatives. There has been a lot of money spent over a long time, and the gap is not closing. So by going through a different process, having a different way of looking at problems and how to address Closing the Gap initiatives, having First Peoples make decisions about their future and have input into how they would like to see these addressed, many savings will flow from that, starting with lives, frankly. It is not just economic; there is the social – but it will save lives. I might just get the Deputy Secretary to add to my comments.

Terry GARWOOD: Thank you for the opportunity to respond to this. This work is transformative work. I am pleased to be part of it, but I am only a part of it because it is being led by First People in Gellung Warl and the First Peoples' Assembly in particular. The position that they have put is 'We know best, First Peoples.' For

too long governments have decided and told First Peoples what is best, and that has completely turned on its head through the establishment of Gellung Warl and its three particular functions.

In relation to the economic prosperity of the state, if First Peoples are prosperous, the whole state is prosperous, and that is an opportunity. The government has already invested \$65 million in the Self-Determination Fund, which has two purposes. The first purpose is to provide capacity resources for First Peoples to be able to negotiate in the treaty space, because government has significant resources available to it. That is not the case for First Peoples, so there are some resources there to even up the playing field, if you like. The second area, which is to promote economic prosperity, is an area that the government is carefully considering at the moment, and I dare say in the future we will have more to say about that as a result of the ongoing involvement of the First Peoples' Assembly of Gellung Warl. I always say this is a different assembly. The first assembly had one job, which was to negotiate treaty. This is the third chamber of the first assembly, and their job is to work with the government to deliver treaty, and that is an entirely different role. And that takes us into the economic prosperity space. There are Aboriginal communities right across Victoria, whether it is Shepparton, Mildura, Bairnsdale, Warrnambool, Portland, Melbourne – all across the state. Members here know their Aboriginal communities. They know them, and there is an opportunity to promote the economic prosperity, because if that is promoted, the whole community is successful.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Well said.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Garwood. 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 break before beginning its consideration of the portfolio of roads and road safety at 4:10 pm. I declare this hearing adjourned.

Witnesses withdrew.