

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the 2026–27 Budget Estimates

Melbourne – Monday 25 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

Natalie Suleyman MP, Minister for Veterans; and

Argiri Alisandratos, Deputy Secretary, Disability, Fairness and Emergency Management,

Gerry Goswell, Executive Director, Community Inclusion, Veterans and Youth, and

Aaron Coutts, Director, Office for Veterans, Department of Families, Fairness and Housing.

The CHAIR: I declare open this hearing of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee, and I ask that mobile telephones please be turned 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, any comments repeated outside of 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 Veterans the Honourable Natalie Suleyman as well as officials from DFFH. 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 some questions. Your time starts now.

Natalie SULEYMAN: Thank you, Chair, and thank you to the committee for giving me the time to present on the veterans portfolio, including our government's investments through the 2026–27 state budget. I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we are meeting here today and pay my respects to their elders, both past and present. I would also like to acknowledge and thank our veterans for their service and sacrifice and thank their families for their support.

Visual presentation.

Natalie SULEYMAN: It is an honour to serve as the Minister for Veterans. Our government continues to ensure we honour and commemorate Victoria's veterans. We continue to work in partnership with the Commonwealth government and the ex-service community to help our veterans and their families access the supports and resources they require today and tomorrow. Over the past 12 months we have boosted funding to both the Shrine of Remembrance and RSL Victoria to ensure that both organisations are well supported in their important roles. We are proud of the enduring impact and legacy of the Shrine of Remembrance, now 91 years old. The shrine has become not just a memorial but a place of education for our young people, a destination for visitors as well, and continues to hold a very special place in the heart of Victorians.

This year we announced additional funding for the Anzac Day dawn service at the shrine, providing an additional \$680,000 to RSL Victoria for 2025 and 2026 services. The 2025 service had over 55,000 attendees, which shows incredible support for the veteran community. We have continued to provide grants to our veteran organisations such as Melbourne Legacy, Soldier On, Vasey RSL and many more that continue to do critical work supporting our veterans. Grants provided through the Anzac Day Proceeds Fund, Victoria Remembers, veterans capital works and Restoring Community War Memorials and Avenues of Honour program in 2025 and 2026 total \$2.6 million across 80 projects.

The Veterans Card Victoria set a new benchmark this year, with over 25,100 veterans now registered. With funding invested through last year's state budget, the public sector veteran employment strategy was extended for a further two years, helping more veterans into good, secure jobs. The Premier's Spirit of Anzac Prize had another successful study tour to Gallipoli in 2025, educating more young Victorians about our war and peace-keeping history, and another tour will take place this year.

The 2026–27 state budget provides funding of \$1.2 million for the veterans capital works grants program. This investment supports safe, accessible, fit-for-purpose infrastructure that supports veterans and their families. Funding will also extend the veteran recognition of prior learning initiative, delivered in partnership with Wodonga TAFE. This initiative improves employment outcomes and, importantly, recognises the skills our veterans have gained in their careers in the defence forces. Our government remains committed to ensuring that veterans and their families get the support that they deserve.

I want to close by extending my appreciation and acknowledging all veterans for their service and the organisations that support them each and every day. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. The first 8 minutes are going to Ms Benham.

Jade BENHAM: Thank you, Chair. Minister, I note that in the presentation at the beginning you said that the take-up of the veterans card last year was 20,000, and now it is 25,100. Is there any progress on the hard copy of the card? We spoke about that last year as well, and last year you said that it was important feedback, that a hard copy card was a good idea, and you were happy to explore that feedback. How did that exploration go?

Natalie SULEYMAN: Thank you for that question. I do want to start with stating for the committee that the Veterans Card Victoria is an initiative that Victoria should be proud of. We are the only state that introduced and launched this card, on 1 July 2023, and it is the first of its kind, as I said. Over the past three years we have seen registrations have grown and continue to –

Jade BENHAM: Only 5100 in the last year, though. Is there any progress? I am just after an update on the hard copy of the card, instead of it being digital only.

Natalie SULEYMAN: Well, can I say that that is 5100 men and women who have served this country. Some are ex-defence personnel, and some are serving.

Jade BENHAM: And we thank them for that, Minister, but there are more that have expressed that they would like a hard copy of the card, rather than a digital one. This has been a theme throughout all of these hearings.

Natalie SULEYMAN: Can I just add that when we do talk about numbers, these are real numbers that are serving and also ex-servicemen and women of our defence force – over 25,100 registrations so far. I actually had a veteran in my local –

Jade BENHAM: So it has not been explored, to create the hard copy card that veterans have been asking for?

Natalie SULEYMAN: I do want to add, just giving an example – and I will answer your question because it is an important question. The main aim of the Veterans Card Victoria was to recognise the service, and it was a small way of thanking our veterans. I can say that just last week a veteran came to my office and we were able to print the card. We spoke about this last year – that the ability for a veteran to have a physical copy requires a printed version. So once you have joined online –

Jade BENHAM: But wouldn't it be easier to just send them a card?

Natalie SULEYMAN: I think what is practical and what is a very quick process is to actually just print the card. Most of our veterans – as you can see, the veterans card from last year, we have seen an increase. So our veterans are actually taking up –

Jade BENHAM: But wouldn't a take-up of 75,000 – nearly three-quarters, because 25,000 is about a quarter of veterans in this state – be a better figure? All they have been asking for, as you know, once they register for a veterans card, is to be sent one in the mail.

Natalie SULEYMAN: I think it is important to note that since the launch of the Veterans Card Victoria we have seen our veterans, whether they are serving or ex-servicemen and women, take up this program. And they are significant numbers – over 25,000 in Victoria taking up and applying online. As I said, the card online can be printed. But I would like one of my officials just to elaborate in relation to the take-up –

Jade BENHAM: Please.

Natalie SULEYMAN: because it is important for the committee to know that these are significant numbers. Over 25,100 veterans joining up to Veterans Card Victoria is actually quite significant. I think it is important, Ms Benham, if you can –

Jade BENHAM: Yes, and we are saying that 75,000 would be a better number. This is the third year, and we have spoken about this on several occasions. Mr Coutts, have you got any answers as to the likelihood of a hard-copy card?

Gerry GOSWELL: Thanks, Ms Benham. I am happy to speak in the first instance and then hand to Mr Coutts for anything additional from a veterans portfolio perspective. In terms of two data points that might be useful to the committee, out of the more than 25,000 registrations, the department has received about 177 individual direct contacts seeking support or raising issues with the card. So that is 177 out of more than 25,000, and we have been able to work closely with those individuals and resolve them. That is part of the service we provide in close contact with Service Victoria. So we are quite confident that when any questions are raised, the department is able to quickly engage.

Jade BENHAM: No doubt. Sorry to cut you off. The question was more that last year we had this conversation. The minister said it was a good idea, and I am just asking the minister what she has done in the last 12 months since then. It is a pretty simple question, I would have thought.

Natalie SULEYMAN: I think it is pretty clear there are two things that have occurred in the last 12 months. We have seen an increase in veterans signing up for the Veterans Card Victoria. Secondly, the department stands ready to assist our veterans, whether they –

Jade BENHAM: No doubt about that. I was asking more about how that exploration from you had gone.

Natalie SULEYMAN: Well, that is exactly what we have done. Thirdly, the card remains online and the ability to print the physical card is also available. So there are three things.

Jade BENHAM: Okay, great. Thanks. Mr Coutts, have you got anything to add?

Aaron COUTTS: Not particularly on the card numbers. I think that has been gone through quite well. I will just note that supporting veterans is primarily a Commonwealth responsibility, and this card and this state going forward with this card has done the first of its type across Australia. It is amazing and it has picked up a number of people that would otherwise not have been connected to any form of government support. And that has supplied real, tangible assistance to veterans and their families that they would otherwise not have had. The card is doing its job. The other thing I would say is the speed by which you are able to access benefits comes as a part of the digital exploration of the card as opposed to the physical card.

Jade BENHAM: No doubt the card is doing its job. There is no question about any of that. As MPs, we all get questions from veterans wanting a physical card and the digital only accessibility has been a real theme across multiple departments during these hearings. As I said, I asked the minister last year about the physical card when they register, could they get one in the mail? I am just after whether that is a possibility. Is that coming?

Natalie SULEYMAN: Can I add again that veterans can register, and I will explain the steps, via the Service Victoria app or website and receive the card number. Once they receive the card number by email, it can be printed. I do need to highlight to the committee that the card, once it has been received by email, can be printed –

Jade BENHAM: If you have got a printer. Thanks, Minister. We have got our answer.

Natalie SULEYMAN: so you do have a physical copy of it.

Jade BENHAM: In the 'Department Performance Statement', page 37, the veterans budget is \$12.5 million, which is a cut of \$7.7 million on the previous year. The reason is the revised delivery timeline for the Vietnam Veterans Museum. Where has that money gone? Can you take that on notice?

The CHAIR: Thank you. I will go to Mr Hilakari.

Mathew HILAKARI: Thank you. Thank you very much, Minister and officials, for your attendance this morning. Minister, I am going to take you to the 'Department Performance Statement' and page 46. This relates to the Premier's Spirit of Anzac Prize, which is much loved across the community and also something that is very engaged with within the community. I am just hoping to see how the program is going this year. We had double the target in the 2024–25 financial year. Is it still receiving that great interest from school students across Victoria?

Natalie SULEYMAN: Thank you very much for this question, Mr Hilakari. This is something that I am extremely passionate about, and our government has been extremely committed to rolling out and ensuring that young people across our state have the opportunity to be part of the Spirit of Anzac Prize competition. We have supported a more deliberate, more focused approach and, I must add, a targeted approach to ensure that we are promoting this competition across not only Melbourne but also regional Victoria, across our Victorian secondary schools. We have placed strong emphasis on reaching out to schools, whether that is in the west, those vulnerable communities, and ensuring that students in growth areas are given the same opportunities.

I do want to note for the committee that there is an article in the *Age* today about a recipient of the Spirit of Anzac Prize, Cecilia, who is amazing and who has now received offers from Yale, Harvard and a number of international universities. In that article she talks about the value of the Spirit of Anzac competition and what impact it made to her. It is really warming to see that such a humble program has been able to make an impact in a young person's life, who has been able to travel as part of a team to Gallipoli.

These competitions and programs have really transformed and made these impacts. We were very direct in our approach, and that was to set out a plan to ensure that principals, teachers and student coordinators were aware of this program. It was not just introduced and available online; we took that extra step to ensure that local secondary schools knew about the competition. I think the best form of awareness is the discussion between the young people themselves. Those who have experienced and been recipients of the Anzac Prize who have travelled in the last 12 months – the way that they come back on their return and speak to local young kids in their communities, from the school to the sporting club, and talk about their experiences and the impact that it has had on them. These are programs I have seen myself, and I know many members around this table have seen the impact that it has had on young people. I am really pleased to be able to look at ways that we have targeted and increased the awareness to ensure we get many young people applying and aware of the Spirit of Anzac Prize competition.

Mathew HILAKARI: Minister, it is so great to hear the stories of people like Cecilia and how government programs are educating and also being transformative to people's lives. I am keen to hear if you have got any other information to share with the committee about recipients of the award, but I am also happy to lead into the government's broader approach to veteran commemoration and education. I know what a passion it is, education, for yourself, Minister, and that sharing of our history across our community.

Natalie SULEYMAN: Yes, absolutely. Thank you for that question, and that is why we work closely with the Shrine of Remembrance, Melbourne Legacy and RSL Victoria to ensure that we continue to provide that rollout of programs. I do want to just briefly talk about the impact of another recipient, a young person that just recently was part of the Anzac Prize competition, and he is actually from the west. Again, it was a powerful story that Jack shared. One thing that I have really tried to emphasise is that when young people return from the journey they remain in the opportunity to volunteer, whether it is at the Shrine or whether it is at a local RSL, to actually continue to build their communication and their experience. Just recently at the Premier's Anzac luncheon we had Jack speak publicly about the impact that the journey had on him. In front of over 300 veterans he delivered a moving and deeply personal poem of how the experience had changed not only himself but also his family and his local community. It was such a moving poem to hear. This local student would probably otherwise not really have had a clear understanding of the service and sacrifice of our veterans, but he was able to experience that journey to Gallipoli and then to come back and become in a way an ambassador and speak about the journey and in a meaningful way reflect with confidence and maturity.

He is also wanting to do more for our veterans community. Jack spoke about his passion now to highlight Anzac Day, be involved and be part of that dawn service in his local community – and also Remembrance Day. This is what these sorts of programs do; they actually change young people's perspectives and understanding of

our war and peacekeeping efforts. It is so important now more than ever to have these sorts of programs that build, as I said, not only confidence and networking – on top of the educational benefits – but also that leadership capability. At that luncheon I was speaking to ADF personnel who said to me, ‘Jack’s story resonates in all of us, and we want young people like Jack participating and being part of our organisations.’ It was really moving to hear from Jack and to know that he is now in his community and in his soccer club – he plays soccer – sharing that story and understanding Australians’ deep, deep respect for our veterans. That is why in my portfolio I am really honoured to have rolled out this program giving young kids the opportunity to travel. For some of these kids, they would not have had the opportunity to travel interstate, let alone overseas. Hearing of their stories, their projects afterwards and how these programs have impacted their lives and their local communities is just welcoming. I look forward to the next round of students departing in the coming months.

Mathew HILAKARI: Fantastic. Minister, I am going to take us forward a little bit to the veterans capital works program, and the veterans capital works program is mentioned on budget paper 3, page 42. I am just checking that the program has been renewed in the budget, and I am hoping you can talk to the proven connection between capital works projects and the wellbeing improvements for veterans and their families.

Natalie SULEYMAN: Thank you, Mr Hilakari, for that question. We absolutely see a clear connection between capital works programs and their projects and of course the improvement of wellbeing outcomes for our veterans and their families. That is why we are absolutely committed and funding through the veterans capital works program has been extended. Through this program we are supporting upgrades and improvements to local facilities that are used by veterans and their families. These spaces are much more than buildings. We know that for many veterans it can be the only place for them to get together, network, share experiences and also share their challenges with one another. These places have a strong sense of belonging, and that is why they play an integral role. With these sorts of capital works programs, we need to ensure that veterans feel supported in every part and ensure that they continue to be connected within their communities. I think a really strong point for us is to ensure that our veterans are connected with their local communities, because after all, they have served our –

Mathew HILAKARI: Thank you, Minister.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Mr Puglielli.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you, Chair. Good morning, Minister and officials. In the slides we heard that the public sector veteran employment strategy has been extended two years. In the ‘Department Performance Statement’, page 46, we see that 255 veterans were employed for the 2024–25 reporting financial year. Can the department give us a breakdown of where those 255 veterans have been employed by departments and VPS agencies where they are actually employed?

Natalie SULEYMAN: Yes, thank you. First of all, for the record, the 2025–26 state budget allocated \$800,000 over two years to extend the public sector veteran employment strategy to June 2027, with a new target to employ a further 500 veterans. I am very proud to report that as of 31 December 2025 a total of 1972 veterans have been employed in Victorian public sector roles under the strategy since July 2017, including 239 into corrections, 643 into Victoria Police’s sworn recruitment streams and 1090 into other public sector roles, and the current total of veterans employed under this strategy now sits at 2005.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Can I just follow up maybe that contribution: those other roles that were just mentioned – can you come back to us with where those roles are?

Gerry GOSWELL: It is going to be a long list of agencies, Mr Puglielli.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. On notice, in the interest of time, if that is easier.

Gerry GOSWELL: I can read those out for you. For example, VPS departments that have employed veterans over this period include Court Services Victoria; Department of Education; Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action; Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, our own department; Department of Government Services –

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Do you have numbers that you can give us for these?

Gerry GOSWELL: Yes, absolutely, I could read those out for you. If I give you the example of Court Services Victoria, since the strategy started in 2017, 45 veterans have been employed. In Department of Education, since 2017, 41 veterans have been employed. In Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action, since the start of the strategy 121 veterans have been employed. In Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, since then 52 veterans have been employed. Department of Government Services, 15 veterans; Department of Health, noting that that has been a combination of health and human services over time, based on MOG changes, 27; Department of Jobs, Skills, Industry and Regions and its predecessors, 39; Department of Justice and Community Safety, 342 – that picks up, obviously, the large number of corrections and VicPol staff that the minister spoke to, which is why that number is high. We see a lot of veterans, given the transferability of skills, in the corrections and Victoria Police workforces. That is a really strong fit for veterans and a strong pathway of them joining the public sector. Department of Premier and Cabinet, 15 veterans, Mr Puglielli.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: You could table it, if you wish. It is up to you.

The CHAIR: 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 is going to take a break before beginning its consideration of the portfolio of Presiding Officers at 11:10 am. I declare this hearing adjourned.

Witnesses withdrew.