

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the 2026–27 Budget Estimates

Melbourne – Friday 15 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

Vicki Ward MP, Minister for Natural Disaster Recovery;

Emma Cassar, Secretary,

Dean Tighe, Deputy Secretary, Emergency Management, and

Fiona Dowsley, Acting Chief Operating Officer, Department of Justice and Community Safety; and

Timothy Wiebusch, Emergency Management Commissioner, and

Mariela Diaz, Deputy Commissioner, Relief and Recovery, Emergency Management Victoria.

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, comments repeated outside of this hearing may not be protected by this privilege.

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

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 Natural Disaster Recovery the Honourable Vicki Ward, as well as officials from DJCS. Minister, I am going to invite you to make an opening statement or presentation of no more than 5 minutes, after which the committee will ask you questions. Your time starts now.

Vicki WARD: Thank you very much, Chair. In opening I acknowledge the Wurundjeri, the traditional custodians of the land which we are on, and pay my respects to elders past and present, Aboriginal people here and those who might be watching online.

Visual presentation.

Vicki WARD: Natural disasters are hard on people and communities. They are disruptive. They are disruptive to homes, businesses, roads and community assets as well as our environment. Our government has a very strong commitment to disaster-affected Victorians, and we have never wavered from that. Over the years this has totalled over \$4 billion. Through EMV, government and agencies quickly move on the ground and target support in responding to community while always looking to progressively improve the broader recovery system. And with the new Deputy Commissioner for Relief and Recovery, our ability to support our communities in an integrated manner increases.

As part of my time here today I will speak to recovery overall and the coordination of the government's recent sizeable investments in supporting the recovery from the recent 2026 bushfires. We saw on 9 January, for example, there were 200 fires in a day, and we have seen how devastating these fires can be. Houses were lost, livestock destroyed and farmland scorched. Relief centres were immediately put in place, and I thank local government for this work. The Victorian government quickly began the process of providing targeted relief and recovery supports, and it is work that still continues today. Working with the Commonwealth government, we have committed more than \$420 million to help those most affected by these bushfires. On 10 January the personal hardship payment program was enacted, with DFFH staff supporting affected people to apply for and

receive payments from that day. On 11 January the first package of investment was announced, providing emergency hardship payments, the emergency recovery hotline, recovery support program, emergency accommodation and support for primary producers. Shortly after, two additional recovery packages provided access to grants for primary producers, mental health supports, financial counselling and support for businesses, state road repairs, assistance to clean up affected eligible properties and funding for council-led recovery. And recently we have committed further investment to provide more free legal services and longer term accommodation which is available to eligible residents.

We know recovery has a very long tail, and we are seeing government investment deliver benefits for affected people and businesses. To date, more than 62 households have received support for emergency accommodation. For fodder relief we have sourced, procured and delivered more than 19,000 emergency fodder bales. We also set up straightaway the 1800 recovery hotline, and we know that to date more than 5000 calls have been received by that hotline. Most callers have chosen to connect to the emergency recovery support program and to VicEmergency for warnings and incidents and emergency relief payments.

For emergency relief and re-establishment, over 10 000 relief payments have been made to help eligible individuals and families, to support their immediate relief needs, following the disaster, and over 60 re-establishment payments where their home has been lost in the fires. With clean-up through the state-coordinated clean-up program, including site assessments, we are rapidly removing bushfire waste and debris from uninsured and underinsured households, businesses and community assets. We have primary producer grants, where 282 primary producers grants have been approved, ranging from \$10,000 to \$75,000 for clean-up and recovery activities. For council support funding, we have provided 18 councils with up to \$750,000 in funding to help kickstart clean-up and repairs to their affected local public spaces. This includes areas like parks, footy ovals, community centres and playgrounds. We are also providing resources for recovery hubs and to employ community recovery officers to help support locally led recovery programs.

For mental health, to date 66 group counselling sessions have been delivered in the community, providing clear information on what trauma responses look and feel like to help bushfire-affected communities understand how they may be affected in what they do. Thirty-eight state schools are receiving support to employ mental health wellbeing professionals and teachers experienced in trauma-informed approaches and facilitating small group programs for students. We have also delivered funding to increase capacity at mental health and wellbeing locals, including supporting their expansion into bushfire-affected areas. For roads, more than 150 kilometres of state roads within the affected area have been assessed. Critical safety repairs are underway, and crews are removing hazardous trees and debris. Contractors continue to make steady progress on urgent pavement works.

There are also prolonged power outage payments, and we have made available payments of \$3088 a week for up to three weeks for small businesses, with more than 75 payments paid out, and \$2380 a week for households without power for seven days, which has gone to over 1700 households. I would like to thank Ms Diaz and her team for the incredible work they have done over this bushfire season.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. We will go to Ms Benham.

Jade BENHAM: Thank you, Chair. Budget paper reference: BP3, page 3, which is all about bushfire relief and recovery and \$240 million in output. Minister, did you approve the two-tier clean-up program that excluded insured property owners contrary to previous Victorian bushfire clean-up programs and in direct opposition to the position of the Insurance Council of Australia?

Vicki WARD: Ms Benham, what we have done with the clean-up program that we have enacted for the bushfires that we saw over January 2026 and into February has been exactly the same approach that was used for the Pomonal fire. What we have got with the fire, though, that we saw across the state is that a lot of agricultural properties have been affected by the fires, which means that it is not exactly the same to compare this fire to what we have seen with fires previously, where that may have been the case. Where we have got outbuildings and so on that have been destroyed, and it is well over a thousand outbuildings that have been destroyed by these fires, they would not have been covered under the older model. With the work that we have done here, it means for those underinsured or uninsured properties, we are able to have a wider scope of clean-up than what we have had in past incidents.

Jade BENHAM: Has there been any change to that two-tier program in recent days, or does it still only apply to those who have lost property who are uninsured?

Vicki WARD: Or underinsured.

Jade BENHAM: Or underinsured? Have there been any changes?

Vicki WARD: Why do you think there would be changes?

Jade BENHAM: I am just asking the question. It is my question time.

Vicki WARD: No, no, I am just trying to work out where it is coming from. No.

Jade BENHAM: That is exactly why I am asking questions. So no, there have been no changes?

Vicki WARD: No.

Jade BENHAM: Okay. Can you provide to the committee the working group documentation that recommended the two-tier model?

Vicki WARD: The working group recommendation? What working group recommendation?

Jade BENHAM: Who recommended it?

Vicki WARD: We can look to the formula that was used to inform the approach that was taken.

Jade BENHAM: Okay. Have you got that documentation?

Vicki WARD: No, but Ms Diaz might want to talk to it.

Jade BENHAM: Is Ms Diaz able to provide it to the committee?

Mariela DIAZ: The documentation that I think you are referring to is the guidelines that are agreed between the Commonwealth and the state. Those guidelines have been in place from the beginning. They are signed off by NEMA before they are enacted in any event. In relation to the rationale, if that is what you are asking, for the clean-up program, the distinct difference for this event compared to other events is that agricultural properties were impacted. There has not been any event since Black Saturday where we have seen the level of destruction to agricultural property, so in order to help farmers the criteria had to be different. In fact for the six clean-ups Victoria has done since 2020, every single time the criteria has been different. There has only been one event in bushfires where we have done all insured and underinsured properties, and that was in 2020.

Jade BENHAM: Who made that decision?

Mariela DIAZ: That was my recommendation to government in relation to the criteria around eligibility.

Jade BENHAM: Have you got that working documentation as to how you arrived at that recommendation?

Vicki WARD: You are talking about the DRFA agreement?

Jade BENHAM: I am talking about the two-tier clean-up recovery model that separates uninsured and underinsured from agricultural properties.

Mariela DIAZ: It is not two-tiered. There are a number of different elements to the clean-up program, because it also includes businesses and community assets. We did not do that clean-up in the 2020 fire, nor did we do it in the Pomonal fire

Jade BENHAM: We are just after some clarity for community members. We are just after some clarity on where the model came from and what the recommendations were. Are you able to provide that to the committee?

Vicki WARD: It is working through what is required under the disaster recovery program agreement that we have with the Commonwealth, and therefore each disaster is taken on its own individual merits. You work

through what is the best way to approach it that could also ensure that you can get things done as quickly as possible.

Jade BENHAM: I note the announcement from the Commonwealth yesterday for modular housing for those who have lost homes in the bushfires. When will those modular homes be made available? And can you confirm if they are actual modular homes? Or are they other types of transportable buildings?

Vicki WARD: Ms Diaz will be able to talk to you about what the –

Jade BENHAM: That is why I am directing the question to Ms Diaz.

Mariela DIAZ: The modular homes are available. They are available now.

Jade BENHAM: And they are modular homes – they are not caravans?

Mariela DIAZ: They are modular homes, and Homes Vic have got those in supply. There are people who have registered for assistance with temporary accommodation, which includes both caravans and the modular homes, depending on people's personal circumstances.

Jade BENHAM: They are available to be ordered now?

Mariela DIAZ: Correct.

Jade BENHAM: Fantastic. Thank you.

Vicki WARD: Just to be helpful, there are 81 people who have been referred for temporary accommodation.

Jade BENHAM: Excellent. Because there are people in Longwood and Ruffy going into winter, as you can well expect, without a permanent roof over their heads. Will they be available? It is cold now.

Vicki WARD: Yes, absolutely.

Jade BENHAM: In December the government accepted in part the Silver review's recommendation to fold Emergency Recovery Victoria into Emergency Management Victoria. Why did this restructure continue in the midst of a bushfire crisis and recovery operation?

Vicki WARD: Thank you for the question, Ms Benham. It did not; it paused.

Jade BENHAM: It paused.

Vicki WARD: Did you want to elaborate further?

Emma CASSAR: I am happy to elaborate.

Jade BENHAM: Thank you.

Emma CASSAR: We deliberately paused, and of course the bushfire and recovery were the utmost priority for those areas of the department. At the appropriate time, once things were under control, we had a follow-up discussion to say 'Do you think it's okay to have these discussions now? Or do you still need more time?' and I think we paused again. It was not during the bushfire season; it was well after. It was only through active discussion with the commissioner and the deputy commissioners for their level of comfort to proceed.

Jade BENHAM: Is it still the amalgamated single service? And have any jobs been lost?

Emma CASSAR: As part of the Silver review – we move very quickly – as a department we lost 22 executives. There were three –

Vicki WARD: But not within –

Emma CASSAR: No. That is the department. There were three for ERV, which were a consolidation of roles as the executive, but that is an executive restructure only. As deputies and commissioners work through

their areas and would like to make minor adjustments, there is a clause 11 process for that, but what I am really hoping is, where we can – I think this is the easiest way – to manage that through natural attrition for the VPS.

Jade BENHAM: The government this week has extended the waiver of tip fees for landfill to the end of June. How many bushfire-affected residents are yet to even begin their clean-up? Do we have notice of that?

Vicki WARD: Ms Diaz can talk to those who have registered to participate in the clean-up program where they are eligible, but there would also be people who would be working through with their insurers – when they are fully insured – how they will navigate that clean-up and when their insurer will come in and do it. But for clean-up that has commenced for underinsured or uninsured, Ms Diaz will be able to talk you through that.

Mariela DIAZ: Is your question specific to people who have lost their primary place of residence?

Jade BENHAM: Yes. We are coming into winter, and there are residents out in those communities who are yet to even begin the clean-up.

The CHAIR: Thank you. We are going to go to Ms Kathage.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you very much, Chair, minister and officials. I think what we have been touching on earlier in your presentation – I know it is also the programs listed on pages 3 and 4 of BP 3 – is that, obviously, in times of disaster people need help quickly. It is of the essence. What immediate relief did the government provide for bushfire-affected people?

Vicki WARD: Thank you. They were extraordinary days with catastrophic conditions. The response was incredible, but the recovery response has also been phenomenal. I know that for some people it may not always feel that way, but I can assure everybody that people have been working incredibly hard to get things done as quickly as possible. I know that from my own experience going to the Seymour relief centre on 10 January, where I saw Department of Families, Fairness and Housing staff already there helping people to work through and process their emergency relief payment. Some people were getting it, I think, within a day or two, but there were people who were there that afternoon. The member for Euroa also saw that with me, where people were getting money then and there. Emergency accommodation was also worked through in those first few days, and then the following day is when the Premier and I went out and also made an announcement around our first support package.

I do want to acknowledge, in talking to the first support package that we announced, not just the volunteers who were there helping people, whether they be Red Cross or others, but workers from local councils as well as DFFH, who did work incredibly hard to support bushfire-affected Victorians. All up we have committed \$421 million. On 11 January – I want to talk to the emergency relief payments – there were amounts of \$680 per adult and \$340 per child, which was up to a maximum of \$2380 per eligible family, and those payments were immediately going out from that day. To date we have made 10,303 payments, which total \$12 million. Our investment has included vital support for bushfire-affected communities, residents, farmers, businesses and council. That goes to the emergency relief payments as well as to those who have needed clean-up funding, mental health supports and financial assistance that particularly can help farmers start to plan their way again. This action meant that we quickly set up a 1800 number to call for bushfire-affected Victorians to access recovery services, and we have had over 5000 calls to that hotline number.

Lauren KATHAGE: Wow.

Vicki WARD: Case support workers were available to help navigate services through the recovery support program. As of 28 April, 1863 households had been referred to the recovery support program, with 389 households receiving case support. We have invested \$4.4 million in immediate emergency and temporary accommodation to ensure that those without insurance or alternative accommodation had somewhere to go. Eighty-one households have been accommodated so far, and we have already spoken about those who have been referred to temporary accommodation. Importantly, there has been psychosocial group support that has also been offered – the counselling that is there to help people in their community, with their community, start to understand what trauma looks like, what they are experiencing, what it will feel like and how they can work through it. That started off in Harcourt on 27 February with 50 in-person attendees and 1600 online viewers. Alexandra had one on 4 March with 3300 online viewers, and Fawcett on 10 March with 40 in-person attendees and 1700 viewers. We also have provided emergency re-establishment payments of up to \$51,200 per

household to help bushfire-affected residents who are eligible return home when they were able to where there has been serious damage, and so far 61 households have received those payments.

Those who lost power, as I said earlier in my presentation, could access the prolonged power outage payments, and so far 1738 applications have been paid. We refilled water tanks for households with no access to reticulated water, where drinking water was contaminated from the fires, and a total of 489 deliveries of water were made.

It is a complex system and I can talk to you later about how DRFA works, or Ms Diaz may wish to, but it is a system that is not just one lever. In order to get the recovery happening you have got to work with the Commonwealth, you have got to work with NEMA, you have got to stick to what is in the guidelines and you have got to work out incrementally step by step what a community are ready for and what you can invest in to help support them. So it is not something that is a decision that can be made overnight. There are actually multiple moving parts to get to the point where we can announce the supports that come through the DRFA.

Lauren KATHAGE: As I understand it, under emergency response protocols a lot of that immediate relief and recovery work on the ground is done by councils, backed up by government.

Vicki WARD: Yes. That is right.

Lauren KATHAGE: So can you talk us through how that –

Vicki WARD: Yes. Councils have done an extraordinary job. So many councils just so quickly set up. They had all their plans and strategies in place, and they just went in and did it. For a number of councils, you have got council workers whose immediate community – sometimes their own homes – have also been affected by the disaster, but they are there supporting other people to manage and get through. So a lot of that work is done at a local level, and it is really good to be able to use councils because they have already got established relationships with communities. There are relationships of trust. People know each other. So they are perfectly situated to be there to be able to help people out in their very, very first step of recovery, which is finding somewhere safe to be.

Given the large amount of cross-government coordination required, funding for relief and recovery programs is generally provided through, as we were talking about before, the DRFA, which are the disaster recovery funding arrangements. It is a cost-sharing arrangement between the Commonwealth and the states to support relief and recovery activities following natural disasters, and for a lot of the core immediate relief and recovery work, like establishing the relief centres, which councils did, or repairs to essential public infrastructure. That work is completed by councils, which are then reimbursed for that eligible expenditure incurred to deliver activities under category A within the DRFA or category B within the DRFA. That is money that comes from both the state and the Commonwealth in that reimbursement.

We know that the disaster recovery funding arrangements are complex and they are particularly challenging for small councils, because there is a lot of paperwork, there is a lot of stuff to work through. It is a bit cumbersome, and I particularly want to acknowledge Ms Diaz for the work that she has done in trying to create, at least from the state's end, a streamlined way of not just supporting people – for example, Ms Diaz put in an EMV worker at Murrindindi council to help them work through their processes within days of the 9 January fires – but also trying to give the tools to support councils to really get their paperwork done as easily as possible so that they can be reimbursed as quickly as possible. So we do work across all levels of government, and that includes talking with the Commonwealth around how we can make this a more streamlined process.

We are maximising funding opportunities as much as possible for our disaster-affected communities, and we do support councils through a number of mechanisms. There are funding advances to assist councils with cash flow issues relating to recovery work. There are reimbursements to support early relief and recovery activities, counter-disaster operations and reconstruction of essential public assets under categories A and B within the DRFA. And there is also event-specific funding such as the Council Support Fund and the community recovery officer program, which is to help them find the staff that they need to support communities. For the Jan 2026 bushfires there has been a lot of work put in to have as many recovery programs as possible. We are supporting affected councils with more than \$15 million to establish the community recovery offices and recovery hubs across bushfire-affected regions, including grants of up to \$75,000 for community-led recovery initiatives and staffing, and \$12 million through the Council Support Fund for clean-up and repair of public assets such as, as I

was saying earlier, playgrounds, sporting fields and community centres, and \$3.5 million has been paid to funding advances to assist councils with their cash flow relating to recovery works. I do not think I can emphasise enough, Ms Kathage, how grateful we are for the work that all of those affected councils have done but also those neighbouring councils who have also stepped in to support them and even municipal Melbourne councils who have swapped staff and who have helped support other councils who have been affected by these fires to continue to operate and continue to support them in the recovery efforts. So they have been incredibly important facilities for bringing people together, the recovery hubs particularly, and helping to navigate services and get information from government and community organisations. I have seen a few of the hubs, and the one at Euroa that we opened, which the member for Euroa was also at, was terrific. The Strathbogie council have done a terrific job in setting up their hub, in putting in place people there, and the diversity of supports that were available is terrific. It was not just DFFH. It was not just Red Cross. The Insurance Council of Australia were there. There were a bunch of different services who were there ready and able to support people, and the stand-up that councils have done has been nothing short of extraordinary.

Lauren KATHAGE: And farming community support?

Vicki WARD: Yes. There is also farming community support. So there is –

The CHAIR: Apologies, Minister, I will cut you off there. Sorry, Ms Kathage. Mr Puglielli.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you, Chair. Good evening. Starting on ‘Department Performance Statement’, page 96, ‘Objective 2’ or, alternatively, budget paper 3, pages 3 and 4, during the hearings of the inquiry into the 2026 summer fires across the state, community members who were affected by these bushfires reported that it took weeks and, in some cases, months to be provided with caseworkers to assist them with navigating recovery support. Can I ask: will there be funding through this budget to support a more rapid deployment of caseworkers in any future disasters?

Vicki WARD: Well, each disaster is worked through as each disaster emerges, and I know that a lot of work was put into having as many caseworkers available for people as possible, and I would hope that there would not have been too much of a wait for people once they had registered for a caseworker to have one. But Ms Diaz, who has done extraordinary work, might be able to speak to average waiting times.

Mariela DIAZ: Thank you. The process of standing up the recovery support program, which is one of our most important programs – it helps to hook up the individuals and families into all the support services that are available to them, as well as providing them holding support. So in those early days post an event, there are two important services that they get: one is the psychosocial support that they get from the relief centres, whether they are staying there or whether they drop in; and the next one is the intake service that is stood up by Windermere family services in Narre Warren. So that is a phone service to start with, but they are triaged through that process. So as recovery support workers are stood up in each of the agencies in their own communities, the cases are allocated as soon as those workers become available. But there is a holding service that supports people in those early days as programs are stood up.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. Can I ask: in this budget is there an increase in FTE terms for caseworkers?

Vicki WARD: That is within the \$421 million that is in the budget for recovery.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Sorry. Just to clarify: is that a yes?

Vicki WARD: No. What I am saying is that there is \$421 million in the budget to support recovery, and in terms of – I do not have on me what the individual allocation is for caseworkers within that.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: That is okay. Is that something that could be provided on notice? We are talking FTE of caseworkers compared to the previous budget period.

Vicki WARD: Well, we fund organisations who then coordinate their own staffing.

Mariela DIAZ: So for local recovery support there is \$27 million for recovery support. Each event is funded individually. So if you mean previous events – is that what you mean? –

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Yes. Correct.

Mariela DIAZ: like the floods and the fires, we can take that on notice in terms of what was available in other events.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. That would be appreciated. Thank you so much.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Puglielli. Minister and officials, thank you very much for appearing before the committee tonight. 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 creative industries portfolio at 7:25 pm. I declare this hearing adjourned.

Witnesses withdrew.