

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 Creative Industries;

Matt Carrick, Secretary, Department of Jobs, Skills, Industry and Regions;

Claire Febey, Chief Executive, and

Max Coffman, Deputy Chief Executive, Creative Victoria; and

Caroline Pitcher, Chief Executive Officer, VicScreen.

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, any 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 also includes automated captioning, and members and witnesses should be aware that all microphones are live during hearings and anything said may be picked up and captioned, even if you say it quietly.

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

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

I welcome the Minister for Creative Industries the Honourable Vicki Ward as well as other officials from DJSIR. Minister, I invite you to make an opening statement of presentation of no more than five minutes, after which time the committee will ask you questions. Your time starts now.

Vicki WARD: Thank you, Chair. I acknowledge and offer my respect to 65,000 years of traditional owner art and culture that has existed on the lands of the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people. I extend that respect to First Peoples here today and watching online, and I acknowledge and thank the First Peoples Directions Circle, respected First Peoples leaders who embed Aboriginal self-determination and community voice in Creative Victoria's work.

Visual presentation.

Vicki WARD: Creativity is fundamental for who we are as Victorians, and not only have we been named *Time Out's* best city in the world, yesterday we were crowned sixth best city for culture. It is clear that our creative industries are a central pillar of our success and a significant driver of our economy. Recent data found creative industries generate \$41.1 billion annually for our state. The creative economy also backs the jobs of more than 343,000 Victorians – that is 9 per cent of total employment in our state. The current Melbourne arts precinct transformation is the largest cultural infrastructure project in Australia's history. Along with delivering new and upgraded facilities, infrastructure and technology, the project will also create more than 11,000 jobs during construction and more local jobs once complete.

We have seen several record achievements across our creative industries. In 2024–25 more than 11.6 million visitors came to see Victoria's flagship creative institutions. Victoria's screen industry also broke records. In 2024–25 screen projects that received Victorian government investment generated over half a billion dollars in economic expenditure for the state, creating more than 8100 local job opportunities. As Melbourne International Games Week entered its second decade, last year's event saw record attendance of more than

135,000 people. The latest round of the creative enterprises program supports 81 diverse organisations across the state, three more than last year, including 10 new recipients, eight First Peoples-led organisations and 17 regional organisations.

The sector also broke new ground. In December the government partnered with globally renowned local game studio Massive Monster to create MASS, a new games co-working space and industry hub where industry can share knowledge and grow their businesses. Drawing on contributions from more than 1500 Victorians, including 200 First Peoples, last year we launched Creative State 2028, our new strategy that aims to partner with the sector to take advantage of the opportunities of the future and navigate the challenges. Actions that are already underway include the establishment of MASS, and in February we worked with ACMI to create a dedicated forum for creative industry workers, policy makers, educators and academics to discuss the challenges and opportunities of AI.

This budget invests an additional \$81.1 million in initiative funding for Victoria's creative industries. This includes backing creative infrastructure programs and regional initiatives. It builds on our record of investing an extra \$3.5 billion in this sector since our first *Creative State* strategy.

Our initiatives will also support creative businesses, independent artists and communities to continue to create, perform and connect with audiences across Victoria. This includes a \$4.5 million package for the contemporary music industry, supporting the music sector while we work to deliver a statewide contemporary music strategy, an initiative of our *Creative State 2028* strategy. The budget also provides \$1.2 million to invest in regional and outer metropolitan touring, giving Victorians more opportunities to engage with the best artists and cultural experiences while supporting the careers and businesses of artists and creative organisations, as well as growing our economy.

Our creative leadership includes having the best facilities and venues, and an investment of \$7.1 million over four years increases support for the maintenance and activation of our network of state-owned cultural facilities. A \$12.1 million investment in 2026–27 will support infrastructure upgrades to Arts Centre Melbourne's Hamer Hall, ensuring the venue continues to attract and deliver world-class music events, as well as ensuring that it increases its inclusivity.

Victoria's screen industry will continue to be supported through a \$27.2 million investment, building on funding provided in the 2025–26 budget, supporting local projects, industry events and career development initiatives, keeping screen jobs, skills and investment growing in Victoria as global demand accelerates.

Progress towards Australia's biggest ever cultural infrastructure project continues, with \$29 million in operating funding to support the delivery of the Melbourne arts precinct transformation and to manage disruption during construction. This budget is about the future of our creative industries and initiatives that build on our annual funding and promote the social, economic and cultural benefits that a strong creative sector brings to us all.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. The first 13 minutes is going to go to Mr Riordan.

Richard RIORDAN: Thank you very much, Chair. Look, it was great seeing the presentation. We do not all know a lot about the arts, but we know how much it means, and particularly in rural Victoria the arts are often a great way to travel out. But the highlights seem to have left out what seems to have been the taking to the regional arts communities but also other boutique arts communities around the state with a savage blowtorch. I mean, I am listing it here, and just here in Melbourne we have got the Abbotsford Convent, Musica Viva, Writers Victoria – you have snuffed the Snuff Puppets – the Public Galleries Association of Victoria, Australian Print Workshop and Theatre Network Australia. My understanding is, for these guys, Minister, you have just in recent weeks directed they all have no more funding. On top of that, and this is the one for those of us out in the country, the Castlemaine Art Museum, East Gippsland Art Gallery, Jewish Museum of Australia, Linden New Art – they do those great postcard exhibitions – McClelland Sculpture Park and Gallery and Shepparton Art Museum have all been told they have maximum two years funding and then after that they have got to beg, borrow and steal. This is not good news for the arts, and on top of that, you have still got reviews going. What can Victorians expect with this government's support of the arts in the forward estimates? Like, what is happening?

Vicki WARD: Are you directing your question to me?

Richard RIORDAN: I am assuming you probably will not know, Minister, because you are only new.

Vicki WARD: I think that is quite rude of you to say that.

Richard RIORDAN: Well, I am happy to have the –

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan. Minister, if you want to kick off.

Vicki WARD: Thank you.

Richard RIORDAN: No. If I get the choice, I would like that Ms Febey may.

Vicki WARD: Sorry, I did not realise that –

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan, there is no choice. If the minister wishes to kick off and others wish to join in –

Richard RIORDAN: I am allowed to direct my questions.

The CHAIR: I have been Chair of this committee for almost four years. If there are people that wish to answer as witnesses, the committee does want to hear from them. If their evidence does –

Richard RIORDAN: Well, the minister can tell us what is going on.

The CHAIR: The evidence forms part of our report, Mr Riordan.

Richard RIORDAN: Is something like the convent in Collingwood seriously at risk? Are we going to see that close?

Vicki WARD: Thank you for your question. Your preamble to the question and the way you have characterised it I do not agree with, and I also do –

Richard RIORDAN: Sorry, you cannot say that. What bit don't you agree with?

Vicki WARD: I can. I just did say that.

Richard RIORDAN: Well, I am now saying: what bit don't you agree with?

Vicki WARD: Well, I will –

Richard RIORDAN: It is a conga line of misery in the arts community, as best I can tell.

Vicki WARD: I will help you understand that if you will let me finish a sentence, Mr Riordan. I also do find it pretty disrespectful, the comment that you made to me about not being able to understand or knowing anything about this portfolio.

Richard RIORDAN: So you are taking credit for the cuts. That is okay. I was actually sparing you the ignominy of being responsible for cutting.

Vicki WARD: Mr Riordan, you are again verballing me. What I am attempting to say, while you continue to speak over top of me, is that –

Richard RIORDAN: So you are fully responsible.

Vicki WARD: You are again verballing me.

The CHAIR: Excuse me, Mr Riordan, you are being rude and disrespectful, and I think you know it. You have asked a question.

Richard RIORDAN: I am waiting for an answer.

The CHAIR: Excuse me. It is not an invitation for you to talk. You have asked a question. The minister is going to respond. Please be respectful. And, Mr Riordan, you can be respectful towards me. Minister.

Vicki WARD: Thank you. While I have been in the portfolio for a short period of time, I can assure you, Mr Riordan, I have been very hardworking to understand the full complexities of this portfolio, and it is a terrific portfolio that I am incredibly privileged and grateful to have custody of. As I was saying in our presentation, we have been awarded the global sixth-best capital city in the world when it comes to culture, and that is because of the investment that this government has made in our creative industries.

Richard RIORDAN: Address the cuts.

Vicki WARD: Our hugely successful creative enterprises program, which is really what you are talking to – you did not name it but I think that that is what you are talking to – is a central Victorian government funding stream for the non-government not-for-profit creative sector. The latest round of the program invests in 81 diverse and dynamic organisations, both established as well as new players.

Richard RIORDAN: Excuse me. Please, I do not need a ministers statement. I just want to know: these very well known Victorian creative organisations and institutions – are they getting their funding, or is it a permanent position that they have got cuts?

Vicki WARD: Mr Riordan, you have named a number of different organisations, and I am giving you the context –

Richard RIORDAN: I have. You have not mentioned one of them yet.

Vicki WARD: I am giving you the context of how this program works. In order to help you understand that it would be also helpful if I am able to give my answer.

Some of the important highlights to note from the creative enterprises program round that was announced late last year are that eight First Peoples–led organisations and 17 regionally based organisations have been included, as well as organisations dedicated to children and young people, festival events and industry peak bodies. Now, is there a particular organisation you spoke to in your list that you would like me to address first?

Richard RIORDAN: I have listed out all the ones, which you presumably are well aware of, that your office and department have personally rung and contacted and told they are not getting funding. Is that the case? Are they going to have to go and put new funding arrangements or go find benefactors or donors?

Vicki WARD: Are you speaking to those who were unsuccessful through the competitive process for the grants?

Richard RIORDAN: I do not think the Abbotsford Convent is considered unsuccessful. I do not think Writers Victoria or the Snuff Puppets –

Vicki WARD: Unsuccessful in their grant application, Mr Riordan.

Richard RIORDAN: No, they have got savage cuts.

Vicki WARD: You continue to verbal me.

John PESUTTO: This is ridiculous. Chair, the question is pretty simple.

The CHAIR: Excuse me, Deputy Chair. I have to say, Mr Riordan, I have been here for a while. This is getting ridiculous. Please just ask the question. You have the officials here from the department and the minister. Ask a question.

Vicki WARD: Which organisation do you want us to –

Richard RIORDAN: All the ones I have named you have told their funding has stopped: is that true?

Vicki WARD: No, because you have named organisations who are getting two years funding as well as organisations who were not successful in their application.

Richard RIORDAN: So why have you cut from four years to two years?

Vicki WARD: Are you changing your question now?

Richard RIORDAN: Well, I am trying to make it easy for you to answer.

Vicki WARD: Well, no, I have actually been trying to help you out in good faith, and all you have wanted to do is talk over the top of me.

Richard RIORDAN: One is from four years to two years. What is their process? Because two years to run a gallery is not much time to get your programs organised and plan ahead if you have got to go through the whole process again in two years. What is the rationale for halving their funding stream?

Vicki WARD: Well, their funding stream has not been halved; they have got exactly the same amount of funding as they have had previously, year on year. What it does do is enable a conversation, as we work through our *Creative State 2028* strategy, to work with those organisations about what their future needs might be.

Richard RIORDAN: So why have the four-year fundings been dropped to two, and why have places such as the Abbotsford Convent, the writers festival, Snuff Puppets, the Public Galleries Association of Victoria all had their funding cut?

Vicki WARD: They were unsuccessful in their applications. As you named Abbotsford Convent first, I will talk to you first about Abbotsford Convent. They are an absolutely fantastic place to be, Abbotsford Convent. I hope that you have visited Abbotsford Convent as much as I have and seen the incredible things that are on offer at Abbotsford Convent – the events and the markets and the festivals that are held there. Now, it was saved 21 years ago by a Labor government, and we continue to support Abbotsford Convent. They were unsuccessful through a competitive process for the creative enterprises program. It is important to also note that Abbotsford Convent has a range of revenue sources that enable it to operate successfully as a community as well as a cultural precinct. Now, we do continue to support activity at the convent, and you will be pleased to note that two of the 81 organisations funded in the creative enterprises round are based at Abbotsford Convent.

Richard RIORDAN: Okay. With these cuts that you have implemented, the review process – is that a publicly available document as to how you arrived at not continuing the funding for these organisations?

Vicki WARD: There was a competitive grant round – a highly competitive grant round – that organisations applied for, and there were some organisations who had received previous funding who were not successful in that grant round.

Richard RIORDAN: Was the pool of money in that grant round the same or greater than what it was last time it was issued?

Vicki WARD: That is not an apples-and-apples question. Because of the different way that it is being approached, it is not, as I was saying to you earlier –

Richard RIORDAN: So it is smaller.

Vicki WARD: No, that is not correct, and again you are verballing me. What I said to you earlier was that if you look at the funding that they have for this year, it is exactly the same as the funding that was available last year.

Richard RIORDAN: Okay. They just missed out on it. The Melbourne Arts Precinct redevelopment – how is the budget looking for that, and is it on time and on budget?

Vicki WARD: Thank you for your question about the Melbourne Arts Precinct. It is a phenomenal project that I think all Victorians should be incredibly proud of. It is the most ambitious and largest cultural infrastructure project in our history. It will include The Fox: NGV Contemporary, which will be Australia's largest gallery of contemporary art –

Richard RIORDAN: Minister, I accept all that because it was in the presentation. I just want to know: is it on time and on budget?

Vicki WARD: There are a number of steps to work through, as I am sure that you would understand, with –

Richard RIORDAN: It is a big project, yes.

Vicki WARD: a project of this size. In terms of the funding as we work through, there is funding available in this budget, as outputs, to continue to support the project as it continues.

Richard RIORDAN: Have you checked if it has got Women in Construction looking after the project?

Vicki WARD: I am sorry?

Richard RIORDAN: Well, there has been a bit of news today about some of these big government build projects having some fairly corrupt practices on there. Have you done any due diligence on whether that is potentially a problem with the arts precinct redevelopment?

Vicki WARD: The first milestone of the project will be delivered six months ahead of schedule with the opening of the refurbished state theatre in October. That is the first part of this project, which is being delivered ahead of schedule.

Jade BENHAM: Are Women in Construction part – is that program part of that redevelopment?

Vicki WARD: I am not aware.

Richard RIORDAN: Secretary, can you confirm?

Matt CARRICK: No, I cannot. We will take that one on notice.

Jade BENHAM: Thank you.

Claire FEBEY: Secretary, I was just going to say the project is being delivered by Lendlease with Development Victoria, and they are monitoring the situation, so there is nothing more that we can share today.

Richard RIORDAN: But you could get back to the committee –

Claire FEBEY: If there is anything more to report.

Richard RIORDAN: on just whether that affects the development.

Vicki WARD: So to just continue on answering the question that you originally asked me, Mr Riordan, the construction works are progressing on schedule as well as the preliminary works for The Fox: NGV Contemporary and the foundations and works on the new deck to support Laak Boorndap, followed by the landscaping works later this year, so it is progressing.

Richard RIORDAN: Okay. Just a quick last financial question: Museums Victoria, ACMI AND Geelong Performing Arts Centre Trust in their 2024–25 financial statements have required letters of comfort; is that something that continues with these major arts organisations?

Vicki WARD: Yes. I am sure that you would appreciate that there have been challenging times for a number –

The CHAIR: Apologies, Minister. We are just going to move forward. We will go to Mr Hilakari.

Mathew HILAKARI: Thank you very much, Minister and officials, for your attendance on this lovely Friday evening. Minister, I am going to take us to the questionnaire, page 30, and actually cover a little bit of the ground that we have covered already with Mr Riordan. In question 4, priority 2 it outlines 81 creative organisations across Victoria which have been successful in the creative enterprises program and 10 new ones –

Vicki WARD: That is right.

Mathew HILAKARI: which is fantastic to hear. Can you just talk to how this helps maintain Victoria's position as a cultural capital?

Vicki WARD: Thank you, Mr Hilakari, and thank you for the opportunity to calmly and clearly talk to you about the benefits that come from this program. It is one of the central pillars of the Victorian government's support for the non-government, not-for-profit creative sector. It is a competitive funding program, and it invests in Victorian creative organisations, focused on investing in leadership, operations, organisational infrastructure and capacity of non-government, not-for-profit creative organisations. The most recent round of organisations ran until September last year, with a peer review process looking with a clear focus on supporting the resilience and growth of Victoria's creative industries. It was really important to be able to broaden the diversity of those recipients, to make sure that as much of Victoria's colour, movement and diversity is being represented and being supported. We are focusing on investing in the leadership, operations and organisational infrastructure and capacity, broadening the diversity of creators, artists and audiences and enhancing community engagement, access and participation in the creative industries across Victoria. As I was saying earlier, there have been 81 organisations, and as you would have noted from the presentation, that is three more than were awarded grants last year. They are receiving support through the –

Mathew HILAKARI: It was a competitive round, so we would have had way more applicants, always –

Vicki WARD: They did.

Mathew HILAKARI: because we have just got such a creative state.

Vicki WARD: We do, indeed. It was highly competitive, and as you can imagine, the calibre of the applications, as I understand it, was very, very high. I am sure that it was an incredibly difficult process to work out who that 81 would be. But the fact that we have been able to expand it, for example, to have eight First Peoples-led organisations, including the Koorie Heritage Trust, Baluk Arts in Mount Eliza, Shepparton's Kaiela Arts, Blak Dot Gallery and the Birrarangga Film Festival, is important to note. There are now 17 regionally based organisations – which I think is an increase of one from the last round – supported through the program, including Port Fairy Spring Music Festival, Punctum, East Gippsland Art Gallery, Flying Fruit Fly Circus and Arts Mildura, and I know the member for Mildura would be very familiar with the important work they do. Have they changed their name recently?

Jade BENHAM: Who are we talking about?

Vicki WARD: Mildura arts.

Jade BENHAM: No, I do not think so.

Mathew HILAKARI: Was it caught with the circus?

Jade BENHAM: No.

Vicki WARD: This is in addition to supporting Regional Arts Victoria, who do incredible work and partner with the Victorian government to deliver the Small Regional Presenters program, supporting community and not-for-profit organisations to program and present shows in their communities.

The outcome also reflects our focus on supporting access for children and young people, a key priority of *Creative State 2028*. All those organisations dedicated to children and young people, such as Western Edge, Polyglot Theatre, Kids' Own Publishing, Bendigo's Arena Theatre and youth music organisation The Push, are doing incredible work, and I am glad that we have been able to support them.

Mathew HILAKARI: That is fantastic. I might just take us to one of the ones you mentioned then, Kids' Own Publishing. Could you tell us a little bit about the significance of supporting young people and kids in their creative spaces and their access to art and culture?

Vicki WARD: This is a really good program to pull out, and thank you for the opportunity to be able to speak about it. Kids' Own Publishing organise community projects co-designed and created with children up to 12 years old, along with their families, carers and communities, and it works across the state. They work with partners in the community to co-design a project. They then work with artists who facilitate creative workshops in which everybody can participate and where children lead the process of writing, illustrating and publishing their own unique story. The children are the ones who are the leaders, so their ability to be creative is not

curtailed by anything. They are able to just be out there and to create their own stories, which is incredibly important but it is also really empowering.

To give you an example, the book *Cheeky Rabbit* was published with Hazara children and their families in Dandenong in 2023. Working with the Dandenong Library and a small group of Hazara families, Kids' Own worked with artists Farzana Rahimi and Annasophia Larsen, alongside a Hazara language consultant, to create this work. It is bilingual, written in both Hazaragi and English, and the pages read from right to left. The children and their families created illustrations using traditional Hazara embroidery as well as collage and line drawings. It is available on their website for \$20, and I am sure you have all got people in your lives that you would love to buy this book for.

I wanted to share that example because they will now have the support through our government and through the program to be able to expand what they do, because it really does deliver so much, it offers so much, and it is a really important offering that is there. It benefits the adult in the child's life, because they are actually seeing the world through the child's eyes, the carers, the teachers, adults, families and community members. And it strengthens relationships both between children and their parents, their carers and the people around them but it also opens up the wider community to what children are thinking and feeling and how they want to express themselves. It benefits our society in elevating the perspectives of children and valuing contributions fundamental to their understanding of the world. Through each project and publication there is a cultural record of how the kids have understood their process and understood their storytelling, but they also fundamentally understand that their lives are valued, that their stories are interesting, that people want to do something concrete with their stories and their creativity, which is a huge confidence boost for any kid. It is something to hang on to, and it is something that is pretty precious.

Mathew HILAKARI: They will keep it for the rest of their life and build on it.

Vicki WARD: Yes, absolutely. What is also good about the program is that it offers opportunities for kids who may not generally engage with reading to become engaged with it. Not only have they been a part of the writing process but there are stories unique to that particular community, that particular cohort or that particular school. Kids who may not normally read will want to read these books because they directly relate to them and directly relate to the peers around them. It also of course benefits children's literature. Most children's books are written and illustrated by adults for children, and to be able to have children's books that are written by children is something that I think is pretty special and we are very lucky to have it, and I am glad it has been funded.

Mathew HILAKARI: I hope they feature in the kinder kits or other kits over time, some of these books.

Vicki WARD: Very good point.

Mathew HILAKARI: That would be a great place to demonstrate some of that amazing work.

Vicki WARD: I think you are right.

Mathew HILAKARI: You mentioned the Birrarangga Film Festival. I understand it screened over 150 films for First Nations people, and they are the original storytellers of this land. I am just hoping you could talk about this organisation and some of the other eight First Nations organisations that you mentioned. It was eight, wasn't it, First Nations organisations?

Vicki WARD: Yes, thank you for pulling them out, because what is also important to note is that they are one of the new ones as well that have been included in this round of creative enterprises program funding. The core vision for the Birrarangga Film Festival is to nurture leadership and provide visibility to global Indigenous filmmakers while creating opportunities to forge new international relationships between screen practitioners. And one of the things I think it is important to note is that being able to learn and develop skills with a sense of safety and a sense of shared story and shared life experience is incredibly important, and this is one of the areas in which Birrarangga will be able to lead.

The most valuable way this is done is through their biennial festival, most recently held in March of last year. The festival showcased over 150 beautiful, raw, inspiring and heartbreaking feature-length films, short films and 360-degree immersive films from across the world. Birrarangga is more than a film festival; it is a platform

that is used that could be quite powerful to celebrate and elevate First Peoples' screen achievements, and it comes with an immense generosity of storytelling. You can watch the films, you can connect with people and connect with stories that may not be familiar to us, even though they are within our own landscape, but also connect to those stories in landscapes far beyond our shores. They are also very gracious and generous in welcoming audiences and screen professionals to expand their knowledge and expertise through panel discussions, performances, masterclasses, networking events and more. Being able to support Birrarangga through the creative enterprises program reflects our commitment, as well as the festival's commitment, to nurturing First People's leadership and to raising the profile of First People's stories, perspectives, experiences and creativity. It is an incredible organisation, led by the vision and brilliance of artistic director Tony Briggs, and it creates a platform for Indigenous storytelling, encourages emerging leaders in the screen industry and creates visibility for Indigenous filmmakers, which I think is pretty important.

Mathew HILAKARI: I am glad you also gave a shout-out to Western Edge before, because there is another member of this committee from the western suburbs. But we are representative of the suburbs in general across Melbourne. We have some amazing arts institutions in town, but what is there for our communities?

Vicki WARD: Thank you. Western Edge is a not-for-profit arts organisation that is focused on creating safer spaces for young artists in Melbourne's west to tell their own stories. Right now their Western Edge ensembles program is free for all young people aged between 18 to 30 across the west to engage young people through art and creativity. This is a particularly important age cohort, because we often see that young people are engaged at school level or they are engaged through other activities they have got when they are under 18, but once they are post 18, that option of being more engaged with community in an arts sense or a creative sense is harder – it is harder to find those people, harder to find those opportunities. So the fact that they have got those opportunities for that age cohort is really quite important.

There is the Substation, which I am sure you are very familiar with, which is an icon of Altona, a multiplatform arts space. And have you been watching *Bad Company*?

Mathew HILAKARI: No. Is that filmed there?

Vicki WARD: It is the location of the Argyle Theatre.

Mathew HILAKARI: There you go.

Vicki WARD: So that is quite fun.

Mathew HILAKARI: Okay. I will do that on catch-up. I have been meaning to watch it. I have seen the ads.

Vicki WARD: Get your iview and start watching it. It is quite funny, and I am sure that there are a number of theatre companies who know exactly who they are talking about.

Mathew HILAKARI: A little bit too close to life, is it?

Vicki WARD: Well, I am not commenting. There is also the Footscray Community Arts Centre.

Mathew HILAKARI: Yes, of course, which is fantastic. I do want to take us to the Find Your Voice Collective. There are great institutions in town as well, like the Sidney Myer Music Bowl and also the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra. Could you just tell us a little bit about some of what they have been doing – the regionally based programs that they are undertaking?

Vicki WARD: Thank you. They are doing some really cool things, and I think I would recommend, after you have checked out iview, that you jump onto YouTube and have a look at their collaboration with the MSO.

Mathew HILAKARI: Why aren't they on iview? That is what I want to know. How can we get them onto ABC?

Vicki WARD: That is a question for the ABC.

Mathew HILAKARI: That is right.

Vicki WARD: Go and talk to the federal communications minister. Sort him out. I assure you it will be as exciting as – it will be more exciting than PAEC. You will love it.

Mathew HILAKARI: That is unbelievable.

Vicki WARD: They are based in Warrnambool and are one of 17 regionally based creative enterprises program recipients. They were founded in 2017, and Find Your Voice has grown from a grassroots regional choir into a creative force, bringing together more than 250 people from south-west Victoria, and creates genuine pathways for deaf and disabled artists. And was this the singer that we heard from at the museum? Was he involved with this?

Claire FEBEY: I think that is right, yes.

Vicki WARD: We had an extraordinary song with MSO a couple of weeks ago, where it was –

Mathew HILAKARI: You know what, it is on the ABC, actually.

Vicki WARD: There you go.

Mathew HILAKARI: It is. I thought I had seen an ad for it as well.

Vicki WARD: Yes. I am going to get the name wrong. It is not ‘Looking for Alice’, but it is similar. It was a beautiful song. The raw emotion that he conveyed in his song was really quite extraordinary.

Mathew HILAKARI: The picture in your presentation was the one.

Vicki WARD: And their work shows the organisations that prioritise being community run and community driven can deliver artistic excellence on the bigger stages, from collaborations with the Wiggles through to the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra, all while keeping accessibility, inclusion and community connection at the core of what they do. Supporting organisations like Find Your Voice means investing in regional Victoria’s creative talent, expanding access to the arts and backing a model of participation that strengthens both cultural leadership and social connection. You can see with the creative enterprises program that there has been an attempt to really work through the whole state to ensure that diversity is represented and that people of all ages and abilities are being supported in a variety of ways through a variety of organisations, because we have got an incredibly vibrant and diverse state, and to be able to find artistic and cultural organisations who are there to support people, regardless of their background, regardless of their faith and regardless of their ability, is really quite extraordinary. I think, again, as I was saying at the start, it is a real testament to why we are the world’s sixth-best creative major city in the world.

Mathew HILAKARI: There are some great examples for Mr Riordan –

Vicki WARD: There are some really great examples.

Mathew HILAKARI: to take with him from tonight. I might move to budget paper 3, page 62. You actually spent a lot of the time in your presentation talking about the economics and the economic drivers of the creative arts, particularly screens and digital games. Each year at PAEC it surprises me again and again just how much that influences the economy in Victoria. We have got a program, the Victorian screen initiative, funded with \$27.2 million over a couple of years. Can you just talk a little bit about that and how that is supporting bringing some of those projects to Victoria?

Vicki WARD: It is a good call-out, because it is extraordinary – the economic growth that comes from the work of our screen industry, whether it is games or whether it is through film or other. The skill set that is developed and the diversity of skills and jobs that are available through the sector are really quite important. With our gaming industry, I think that people tend to think that it is a hobby that someone in a beanbag is doing in the back room, but it is a massive industry. This city, particularly our state, has been leading in this for such a long time. We have really got strong infrastructure and a really strong ecosystem. Ms Pitcher I think would love to talk about how strong and how wonderful the screen industry is.

Caroline PITCHER: Certainly. Thank you, Minister. Over the last four years Victoria’s screen success has come from one thing, and that is a clear government-backed strategy shaped with the industry and delivered

together in a coordinated effort. The results that you have heard of today are significant, with production expenditure growing in the last four years by 89 per cent to \$1.7 billion.

Mathew HILAKARI: That is ‘billion’ with a ‘b’, yes?

Caroline PITCHER: Yes.

Mathew HILAKARI: That is extraordinary.

Caroline PITCHER: Yes, so there is 46 per cent growth in physical production – both local and international – and 226 per cent growth in visual effects, which is highly innovative, highly technical and highly creative, and many, many young Victorians want to be involved in creative industries such as visual effects. It is great to know too that on the back of *Better Man*, which was the first feature film that shot in Docklands Studios Melbourne’s brand new sound stage 6, which the government provided the capital funding to build and which is a really significant infrastructure piece and an economic asset for the industry. Straight on the back of that, Wētā visual effects, really the world’s best visual effects company, was attracted to Melbourne and is staying here and growing.

Then to digital games – with a 710 per cent growth over the period of the strategy, it is really significant. I think one of the things that makes it even more –

The CHAIR: Apologies, Ms Pitcher, I am going to stop you there. We are not going to be going for 5 hours, Mr Puglielli. You could make up for years of lost time. Off you go.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. Good evening. I would like to go back to the creative enterprises program we were speaking about earlier just to clarify the exchange that we have just had. It is my understanding that the duration of some of the grants has shifted. Twenty-four out of the 81 successful organisations received funding for two years instead of what had previously been four. Can I ask: what is the rationale for that reduction in duration of those agreements within the program?

Vicki WARD: As you would understand, it was not a decision that I was a part of, but from what I understand it was around ensuring that there was the greatest flexibility available within the program to ensure that we could get up to 81 organisations but also reflect the diversity of the organisations that were successful in getting through the competitive process.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: When you say ‘flexibility’ is it that you are including more organisations by having –

Vicki WARD: There are three more organisations that have been included.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay, thank you. Can I ask: 81 successful organisations – how many organisations applied?

Vicki WARD: I think it was 200.

Claire FEBEY: 150.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. Is that up on previous years?

Claire FEBEY: It was an increase. I will double-check that, but yes, I think that was an increase.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay, thank you. That would be good to have. Can I confirm just very clearly – we mentioned Writers Victoria earlier – whether Writers Victoria will receive any state funding beyond June 2026?

Vicki WARD: As you would be aware, they have received an additional six months funding to help them post not being successful for this grant round. There are always other grant opportunities within our portfolio, but also potentially others, that they would be encouraged to also apply for.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay, so to understand what has happened there. The competitiveness of the grant round – is that you are saying the reason why they have not received that funding?

Vicki WARD: That is what I understand, yes.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: It is troubling, because they have been funded since the 80s. Is it that they are no longer competitive, as they once were, that they are in the position that they are now not funded by the program?

Vicki WARD: I think that there have been some challenges over the last few years with Writers Victoria, which they have worked very hard to work through. They had an absence of a CEO for some time last year, and I think that there is some work for them to continue to do, which I am sure that they are very keen to do to improve the membership decline that they have seen happen over the last few years. What they do do is important; the ability to mentor and to support emerging new writers is absolutely important. What also, as I understand it, has gone into consideration when going through the applications is looking at what other opportunities there are within those applications but also more broadly within that literary ecosystem in Victoria to help support writers.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: With respect to their application, noting that they had previously been funded by this program, was there a substantial difference in what they had actually proposed to be funded for?

Claire FEBEY: As the minister has said, it is a competitive funding program, and it runs every four years. Having previously been funded is not a consideration in terms of who then receives support.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: No, but in terms of what they are asking for and what they are seeking to deliver, was their application substantively different to any previous round?

Claire FEBEY: It is not really whether it was the same or different in terms of its intent or focus. We are looking at, as you have asked, 150 applications from organisations across the state and different art forms and having to make, with the support and advice of independent peer panels, recommendations about how best to invest for this period of time. So it is not really about –

The CHAIR: Apologies, Ms Febey. 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.

I thank all ministers and officers who have given evidence to the committee today, as well as Hansard, the committee secretariat and parliamentary attendants. I would also like to thank the hospitality, security and cleaning staff who have looked after all of us today.

The committee will resume its consideration of the 2026–27 budget estimates on Monday 18 May at 8:30 am. I declare this hearing adjourned.

Committee adjourned.