

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the 2026–27 Budget Estimates

Melbourne – Monday 18 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

Ingrid Stitt MLC, Minister for Multicultural and Multifaith Victoria; and

Dannii de Kretser, Deputy Secretary, Social Policy, and

Maya Ramakrishnan, Executive Director, Multicultural Affairs, Department of Premier and Cabinet.

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

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

I advise that all evidence taken by the committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. However, 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 the hearings, and anything you say may be picked up, no matter how quietly you say it.

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

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 Multicultural and Multifaith Victoria as well as officials from the DPC. Minister, I invite you to make an opening statement or presentation of no more than 5 minutes, and this will be followed by questions from the committee. Your time starts now.

Ingrid STITT: Thank you, Chair. I begin by acknowledging the traditional custodians of the lands on which we meet today, the lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation, and I pay my respects to elders past and present and to any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who may be joining us today.

I am pleased to appear before the committee as the Minister for Multicultural and Multifaith Victoria. This updated portfolio title pays tribute to the fact that Victoria is truly one of the most culturally diverse places in the world, where people proudly come from more than 300 ancestries and practise almost 200 faiths. This is really special, and something that our government continues to celebrate. Nearly half of all Victorians were born overseas themselves or have a parent who was born overseas. Despite this being a common experience across the community, we also know that newly arrived migrants can face complex and significant barriers to opportunity. The portfolio supports Victoria's multicultural and multifaith communities by celebrating our diverse traditions and fostering community connections, funding crucial community supports as well as addressing racism and religious vilification. The last year has continued to be a challenging time for many within our multicultural communities. The terror attack in Bondi, attacks on places of worship as well as ongoing and new conflicts overseas have all had a profound impact here in Victoria. Now more than ever it is important that governments and political leaders look for opportunities to unite our community rather than stoking the flames of division, and that is why this portfolio is so important.

The Allan Labor government continues to invest and support our diverse communities. Since 2014 our government has proudly invested more than \$750 million to support multicultural communities. Over that time we have issued nearly 17,000 funding agreements and supported over 4000 multicultural organisations to deliver events, initiatives or infrastructure projects. In 2026–27 alone, our investment of \$50 million is more than double the investment in the portfolio when we came to government in 2014. In the past 12 months the portfolio has invested \$8.2 million for 31 multicultural community infrastructure projects, \$2.4 million for targeted supports for Victorians of African heritage, over \$5.99 million to support more than 470 multicultural festivals and events, \$1.7 million to more than 850 multicultural senior organisations, \$2 million to deliver

Victoria's first anti-racism strategy and \$2.24 million through the regional settlement support fund to help regional multicultural organisations deliver essential settlement services.

Our greatest focus over the past 12 months was hearing from Victorians as part of the multicultural review announced by the Premier in December 2024. Its purpose was to recommend ways the government could strengthen our support to multicultural and multifaith communities. Led by George Lekakis, the review made 41 recommendations to government. As part of the initial response to the review the Victorian government has started implementing priority actions, including developing a new *Multicultural Victoria Act* that will establish Multicultural Victoria, developing a new four-year whole-of-government Victorian strategy – consultation is now open – and establishing a new \$5 million multicultural capacity-building program to enable multicultural and multifaith organisations to better support their communities. We have invested \$925,000 in a multicultural museums program, and are introducing a new social cohesion values commitment for all organisations who receive funding from the Victorian Government, recognising language and translation services as an essential service for multicultural communities.

This budget is focused on strengthening our community's capacity to address rising racism and discrimination while empowering our newly arrived communities and multicultural seniors groups. The Victorian government is committed to taking action against racism, faith-based discrimination and hateful conduct in any form, and that is why we are investing \$5.3 million over two years to provide support to around a thousand multicultural seniors groups, \$3.4 million to address the rise in racism and racial discrimination across Victoria and \$3.4 million to continue the support of asylum seeker initiatives, which deliver essential care to people seeking asylum who are ineligible for Commonwealth government safety net supports such as Medicare. Thank you, Chair. I am looking forward to taking questions from the committee.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. The first 8 minutes are going to the Deputy Chair.

John PESUTTO: Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon, Minister and officials. Minister, would you agree that taxpayer-funded multicultural events should be apolitical?

Ingrid STITT: Thank you for that question, Mr Pesutto. Of course we think that celebrating multicultural, multifaith Victoria should be absolutely above politics and something that we all engage in and support. I am sure that I could speak for all of us on this committee when I say we are a proudly diverse community in one of the most diverse communities in the world, not just the nation, and the strengths of our state have really been built on successive waves of migration. I know this is something you personally support, Mr Pesutto. I think that not only the output funding within this portfolio but all of the activities of this portfolio are really centred around social cohesion, making people not just feel that they belong but finding practical ways that people can genuinely participate fully in the community.

John PESUTTO: Thank you, Minister. In light of that, when we look at events like the Premier's iftar dinner, the Premier's Vaisakhi volunteer appreciation reception and other events that are coming up and that have been previously held: the Christian communities dinner, the Premier's Vaisakhi dinner, the Premier's multicultural gala, the Premier's Diwali dinner – if I understood you correctly, Minister, I think you can be taken to have agreed with me that they should be above politics. Do all members of Parliament, regardless of party, have an equal opportunity to participate in those multicultural events?

Ingrid STITT: We have been very proud to celebrate Victoria's multicultural and multifaith communities –

John PESUTTO: Sorry, Minister. I understand that. What I am trying to establish is: does your government and do you as minister ensure that in accordance with these events being held above politics, all members of Parliament have an equal opportunity to participate in those events?

Ingrid STITT: There have been a number of events. I can only speak for the events that have occurred during my time as minister in this portfolio, but I can certainly say that for each of those events that I have attended and that I have been a part of there have been invitations issued to all parties and there has also been, I think, a real collective sense that these events are about the communities that attend them, not the politicians that might host them.

John PESUTTO: There is no question about that, but what I am still trying to establish, Minister, is: do all members of Parliament – forget party; I am trying to move beyond party, because this is above politics, I think

we agree – get an invite to these events or have equal opportunity to attend and support the multicultural communities these events are held for?

Ingrid STITT: I think what I am seeking to get to in answering your question is that these are non-partisan events. They are whole-of-government celebrations, if you like, of those communities. Our government has taken the view that the priority is the ability for community members to attend those events. However, that has not meant that invitations have not been extended to both the opposition and the Greens and others to attend those events. But if I take the iftar dinner as a recent example, I would much prefer to see those tables filled with community members –

John PESUTTO: So would I, Minister.

Ingrid STITT: who are from the communities that are being celebrated, quite rightly, through these events, rather than necessarily having 150 members of Parliament taking up space.

John PESUTTO: Well, Minister, can I put it to you then: why is it that at these events – and let me just put the proposition to you – there are an inordinate number of Labor Party members of Parliament attending but very few, if any, non-government members of Parliament, and that rarely any other party leader, whether it is the Greens, the Nationals or the Liberals or anyone else, is given an opportunity to express words of support for the communities there? Why is that the case, that there are dozens of Labor MPs? I have been to events myself where I have not seen any other non-government MP but only Labor MPs in large numbers. Why does that occur?

Ingrid STITT: Well, I think that – I mean, I find your questions in a lot of ways detract from how wonderful those events have been.

John PESUTTO: We are not doubting that, Minister.

Ingrid STITT: I know that you have attended some of them in your previous role.

John PESUTTO: I would attend more if I was invited as a member of Parliament, Minister, as would we all.

Ingrid STITT: In your previous role, Mr Pesutto, you and I attended many, many multicultural events, many events, and these events have been organised through successive governments. This is not a new thing. These events have been –

John PESUTTO: No-one is doubting that. But who vets the lists? Who vets the invitation lists, or creates them?

Ingrid STITT: Departments that help organise these events go through their ordinary processes. That has included extending invitations to members of the opposition, including the opposition leader.

John PESUTTO: But not opposition members of Parliament in equal numbers.

Ingrid STITT: She has not always taken up those invitations and has sent representatives in her place, which is entirely her call.

John PESUTTO: Does your office review or curate the invitation list? Do you or your staff?

Ingrid STITT: No, I do not.

John PESUTTO: Are you aware of whether the Premier's office or the Premier's staff curates and approves the invitation list?

Ingrid STITT: The Department of Premier and Cabinet organises these events, as is the normal course of events through successive governments. Now –

John PESUTTO: I am not asking about previous governments, I am asking about this one, Minister.

Ingrid STITT: Well, I think it is relevant because you are implying that a different approach is –

John PESUTTO: I am not implying – I am stating it. I think there is a perception that your government favours government MPs over non-government MPs to be able to support multicultural communities at these important events.

Ingrid STITT: Well, I think it is a little unfortunate for you to take this approach –

John PESUTTO: But is it wrong?

Ingrid STITT: and undermine what I think have been incredibly positive celebrations of these communities. Now of course communities – we hear from them week in and week out about what kinds of events and supports they want to participate in, and I can tell you that we have had nothing but positive feedback about the fact that –

John PESUTTO: You have not answered my question, Minister. Are these Labor Party events, effectively, to the exclusion of all other MPs?

Ingrid STITT: No, that is nonsense. They are celebrations of our diversity as a state, which we take very seriously. Our government takes very seriously –

John PESUTTO: So do we. That is why we want to support them, and that is why all non-government members want to support them. Can I ask you, Minister: in a recent FOI provided by the Victorian Multicultural Commission, the Premier's private office was shown in those documents to be heavily involved in editing the guest list for the Premier's multicultural dinner last year. Do you think that is right or wrong?

Lauren KATHAGE: That is not part of the estimates.

John PESUTTO: No, it is. It is part of the 'Department Performance Statement', pages 118 and 120.

Ingrid STITT: Well, I can say that through the normal processes that are undertaken whenever there is an official event, such as the ones you are asking about, there have been Department of Premier and Cabinet support –

John PESUTTO: Will you provide the invitation list so you can assure this committee that these are non-partisan events?

The CHAIR: Thank you, Deputy Chair. We are going to Mr Tak.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you, Chair and Minister. I will take you back to the Multicultural Seniors Support Program, referring to budget paper 3, page 82. Minister, what role does the Multicultural Seniors Support Program play in supporting social connections and wellbeing among our senior, diverse multicultural and multifaith communities? Are you able to share examples of how the funding has been used for our senior organisations?

Ingrid STITT: Thank you for that question, Mr Tak. This is a really wonderful program – something I know our seniors get a lot out of right across the Victorian community. It is really a program that is about fostering social connection, wellbeing and dignity for Victoria's multicultural and multifaith seniors, so it was very pleasing to be able to announce that this budget provides \$5.3 million over the next two years to allow this wonderful program to continue. I know how much the grants are cherished by our seniors organisations. Of course our multicultural seniors have given so much to our community and our state over the course of their lives, and being able to support them in their senior years is important. The multicultural seniors support program recognises the legacy that our multicultural seniors have made, and it is about making sure that our seniors remain connected and supported as they age. At a time when we know that loneliness and social isolation can be a real problem and are on the rise, this program has never been more important.

The program provides funding to our seniors clubs and organisations to deliver activities specifically for multicultural seniors, and this includes social outings, cultural celebrations, language classes, wellbeing programs and programs that help them connect to essential services delivered by the government, including the issues that I was discussing with Mr Riordan in a previous hearing around digital literacy and inclusion. I have been to a number of these groups. I have had the opportunity with the Chair, Sarah Connolly, Member for Laverton, to visit one of her seniors groups in Laverton, and I know that they are enthusiastically taking up the

opportunities provided at those gatherings to do things like apply for their energy saving bonus and so on. But it is also about allowing our seniors to get out and about in our state, and I know that there are a lot of excursions that are undertaken and are able to be undertaken as a result of this funding. For many of our seniors and multifaith seniors, participating in mainstream services can be limited by language barriers or cultural differences, particularly as they age, so this funding also allows targeted programs for seniors to gather in a culturally safe environment so that they can have a more active lifestyle.

The multicultural seniors support program has supported and empowered more than a thousand seniors organisations and reached over 137,000 members across 46 local government areas. It also covers 141 unique ethnic backgrounds across the state. That is just since 2021, so you can see that there is quite a significant impact that we have seen as a result of this wonderful program. I am really proud that we are continuing the funding in this year's budget.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you. I have been attending a number of those events with our seniors organisations in my electorate and also in the south-east, Minister. I go back to your previous answer about the risk of digital exclusion as more services, such as paying bills and banking, are moving online. Minister, how has the multicultural seniors support program helped our seniors to improve their digital literacy and to stay connected with services and also with family and the wider community?

Ingrid STITT: Thank you. That goes to the heart, really, of the purpose behind these programs, and it is certainly something that I am particularly keen to make sure we continue to deliver, not only in this portfolio but also in the ageing and of course government services portfolios, which I have the privilege to hold. Our multicultural seniors support program has really been doing a lot of heavy lifting in supporting older Victorians from diverse backgrounds to build their confidence and skills in digital literacy. This comes particularly as digital inclusion becomes increasingly vital for staying socially connected and accessing those essential services, which I acknowledge are increasingly moving online. For many multicultural seniors, that language barrier and that limited exposure to technology has made it difficult to engage with online platforms and communicate with family overseas, or it might be that they are trying to navigate a digital service such as telehealth or government information via a portal or online banking.

The MSS program has helped bridge that gap by supporting community organisations to run targeted digital literacy training in culturally safe and familiar settings – really fantastic support initiated through introducing our seniors to the basics of using things like smartphones, tablets and computers. They have learned how to send messages using video calling apps like WhatsApp and Messenger. A good example is Whittlesea U3A Inc in the northern suburbs. It has got an estimated 840 members, which is pretty impressive. They have been able to utilise funding from the MSS program to assist with the implementation of their digital literacy program, called 'digital skills mentoring'. In that program they have been able to equip senior members with practical digital literacy skills and greater confidence navigating all sorts of different online systems. Through that tailored mentoring and hands-on support using mobile phones, iPads and Android tablets, participants have learned how to access and register their interest for a range of different important services like telehealth, all the My Aged Care activities and services that are online, online banking, paying bills, shopping online and staying informed through trusted digital platforms. The program has also helped seniors safely navigate technology and improve their awareness around scams and also online safety, so it is playing a really important role in upskilling our seniors to stay connected but also to do it in a way that is safe and effective.

I also think just getting people together, regardless of what they are there to learn about or what they are there to participate in, is incredibly important when it comes to social inclusion, particularly among older Victorians, who might otherwise just not get that opportunity. If it was not for these seniors groups, they may not get out and interact with people other than their immediate family. For many participants this has been great for not only their activities and staying engaged but also their mental wellbeing and sense of independence. The ability to maintain those strong intergenerational relationships with children and grandchildren is also something that can be enhanced through the programs that our seniors groups run. Of course one of the big ones is access to essential services. I think I have already mentioned today how our seniors have been assisted to learn how to apply for things like their energy saving bonus through the programs and activities that our seniors groups run.

We do recognise that digital literacy is not just about technology. It is about inclusion and connection; it is about learning in a dignified and culturally safe environment. Equipping our multicultural seniors with these skills has really supported their independence, strengthened their community ties and enhanced their ability to

access services and engage with what can only be described as a rapidly changing digital world, as well as all of the benefits that come from getting together regularly.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you, Minister – and also to stay connected with the wave of migration, like you said before. With the remaining time I want to ask you to turn to budget paper 3 on page 82 on the work to tackle racism and hate in our community. I have seen an alarming increase in racism across the world in recent years. Victoria is not exempt from that. So how does this budget back our multicultural community and provide support to our community experiencing racism, in short, Minister?

Ingrid STITT: Thank you, Mr Tak. It is a really important question. I think time is probably going to beat us, but the budget does continue our strong investment in this important area of policy.

The CHAIR: Thank you. We are going to go to Mr Puglielli.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon. And carrying on with the same theme, actually, I will start on budget paper 3, page 82. The budget includes \$3.4 million for ‘Making Victoria free from racism’. Can I ask how much of that funding is specifically allocated to initiatives addressing Islamophobia?

Ingrid STITT: Thank you very much for that question. It is a different output. Within the \$3.4 million ‘Making Victoria free from racism’ initiative there will be a number of Muslim organisations who may already have been in receipt of grants through the previous budget but who will be eligible to apply for this funding through our LARI grants, which is our local anti-racism grant initiative. I think that we all know that we have an anti-racism strategy. It is an important road map for the policy work and the work on the ground with communities to work hard to stamp out dangerous attitudes and harm to Victorians. We have been proud to invest in that. But it was important to me that those were opportunities for grassroots community organisations to be supported to do the important work in their communities to tackle this and to support members of what is a very diverse Victoria.

In addition to that, there has been separate funding provided for tackling Islamophobia. There have been a number of important programs – \$3 million worth of funding across a range of different initiatives. We have supported the work of the Islamic Council of Victoria to develop an Islamophobia guide for community members, and we have also done some work within our department to support bystanders when they see examples of racist Islamophobic incidents to be able to support members of the Muslim community.

There have also obviously been important supports that have been provided to the Muslim community around safety and security. Sadly, right across the community, whatever faith people practise, we have seen an alarming rise in graffiti attacks and hateful comments and actions against members of different faith groups, including, sadly, attacks on places of worship. This is something that none of us should tolerate, and we should do everything in our power to make sure that our communities are not exposed to that kind of hateful behaviour.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. Minister and officials, thank you very much for taking the time to appear before the committee today. The committee will follow up on any questions taken on notice in writing, and responses are required within five working days of the committee’s request.

The committee will take a short break before beginning its consideration of the portfolio for Special Minister of State at 3:50 pm. I declare this hearing adjourned.

Witnesses withdrew.