

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 Equality; and

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

Michael West, Director, Seniors Policy, Equality and Elder Abuse Prevention, and

Alison Rutherford, Acting Executive Director, Equality, Seniors, Women and Equity Strategy, Department of Families, Fairness and Housing.

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

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

I advise that all evidence taken by the committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. However, comments repeated outside of this hearing may not be protected by this privilege.

All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard and is 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 be placed on the committee's website.

I welcome the Minister for Equality the Honourable Vicki Ward as well as officials from the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing. Minister, I am going to invite you to make an opening statement or presentation of no more than 5 minutes, after which time committee members will ask you some questions. Your time starts now.

Vicki WARD: Thank you, Chair and the committee, for the opportunity to present on the equality portfolio, outlining our government's investments through the 2026–27 Victorian state budget.

I acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet today, the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation, and I pay my respects to elders, past and present. I also acknowledge Rainbow Mob community members and Aboriginal people here today and recognise over 60,000 years of connection to community and country.

It is a privilege to be with you and talk about all of the amazing things we are doing in equality and to be Australia's only Minister for Equality.

Visual presentation.

Vicki WARD: We remain committed to delivering our nation-leading blueprint *Pride in Our Future: Victoria's LGBTIQ+ Strategy 2022–32*. At least 11.1 per cent of Victorians are part of the LGBTIQ+ communities; that represents a minimum of 600,000 Victorians over the age of 18, which increases to 18.9 per cent among young Australians. Globally we are seeing an escalation in hate and harm directed at LGBTIQ+ communities, including here in Victoria. I want to be clear: the Victorian government stands with LGBTIQ+ Victorians now and always.

Through the *Pride in Our Future* strategy, we are working to ensure all Victorians feel safe, are supported to be healthy, have equal human rights and can live wholly and freely. In a record-breaking season, 334,500 people attended events across the entire Midsumma Festival season in 2025–26. Over the past 12 months, in partnership with Midsumma, we delivered the fifth annual Victoria's Pride, including the street party and

regional activation program, with 15 events across regional Victoria and Victoria's Pride March, with record attendance of 109,759 people.

We continued implementation of the Pride in Ageing four-year trial, supporting older LGBTIQ+ Victorians to stay connected and assisting local organisations to better respond to their needs. Pride in Ageing is working across East Gippsland, Wodonga, Warrnambool and Golden Plains, creating opportunities for older LGBTIQ+ Victorians to age well in their communities. We also expanded the Rainbow Tick accreditation program, with 102 community mental health organisations engaged since 2023, with a further 40 organisations expected this year.

Through our three grants programs, we are delivering \$2.4 million to support community connection, sector capability and visibility. We continue delivery of the QHub program, creating safe, welcoming spaces for LGBTIQ+ young people and their families in Ballarat, Geelong, Surf Coast and online. The program has supported 199 regional clients and families. Since 2023 nearly 13,000 people have been reached through the community engagement, including school visits, helping to strengthen inclusion across entire communities. We know that if one person avoids suicide over an average of every 5.23 years, the program delivers a net benefit, and behind that figure a life is changed, a family supported and a future made possible. We also supported 506 people through the trans and gender-diverse peer support program, delivered in partnership with Transgender Victoria, in response to increasing vilification and community need.

This slide demonstrates some of the incredible outcomes from our government's investment into supporting LGBTIQ+ Victorians. These achievements show the results of our clear leadership and commitment to equality reform, ensuring LGBTIQ+ people can live safely as their authentic selves. While we are proud of this progress, we know there is still work to do. This is why we remain focused on delivering *Pride in Our Future* in full and continuing to strengthen the systems, services and protections that support LGBTIQ+ Victorians to participate fully and equally in their communities.

The 2026 state budget invests \$6.5 million to continue key initiatives that strengthen community connection, reduce social isolation and improve mental health and wellbeing. This includes delivery of three vital programs: QHub, our western Victoria safe spaces program; the trans and gender-diverse peer support program; and Victoria's Pride celebrations, including the street party and the regional activation program. We are continuing to progress whole-of-government reforms, including improving health and mental health outcomes through accessible support, such as mental health and wellbeing locals, supporting the LGBTIQ+ people at risk of homelessness through Pride in Place, improving access to legal support through Q+Law, progressing reforms to protect people with variations in sex characteristics and implementing strengthened anti-vilification programs.

This coming year will see our continued efforts to make a lasting difference for LGBTIQ+ Victorians. Our priorities include continued implementation of Rainbow Tick accreditation, continued delivery of QHub and peer-led support programs, new rounds of community grants and continued support of regional and rural communities through programs like Victoria's Pride and Pride in Ageing. There is more to do, and we are committed to continuing to work in partnership across government to ensure all LGBTIQ+ Victorians live safely, wholly and freely.

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

Jade BENHAM: Thank you, Chair. Minister, thank you for coming in, and thank you for your brownie tax.

Vicki WARD: I am always happy to pay the brownie tax.

Jade BENHAM: If only it was that easy for Victorians. I want to ask about the specialist legal services for LGBTIQ+ Victorians, referencing budget paper 3, pages 72 and 77. What precise dollar amount within 'Enhancing legal assistance for Victorians' is allocated to specialist legal services for LGBTIQ+ communities?

Vicki WARD: What you are referring to is actually funded through the Attorney-General, so you would need to direct that to her.

Jade BENHAM: So it does not come through the equality portfolio at all?

Vicki WARD: Our department – the Deputy Secretary might wish to speak to it – liaises with the Attorney General’s department, and we work through the organisations and so on. But in terms of where that money sits, it sits with the Attorney-General.

Jade BENHAM: Okay.

Argiri ALISANDRATOS: That is right. Funding support for legal services is the responsibility of the Attorney-General and the Department of Justice and Community Safety. We work obviously right across government in terms of the whole of the strategy and make sure that there is a coordinated effort. But the sole responsibility sits with the Attorney-General.

Jade BENHAM: Okay, and that is not new?

Argiri ALISANDRATOS: No.

Jade BENHAM: There was \$1.6 million from last year, that was through the Attorney-General as well?

Argiri ALISANDRATOS: That is my understanding.

Jade BENHAM: Okay. Which legal service providers, if indeed you have oversight of that, will receive that funding, whatever that figure might be? Is there any chance that you could provide that to us?

Vicki WARD: Q+Law delivers the program and offers those supports, and they do the coordination.

Jade BENHAM: Okay. It does not get distributed to any other legal aid service or any other providers?

Vicki WARD: Again, that would be a question for the Attorney-General, but they do work through a network.

Jade BENHAM: Okay. So anything relating to clients and anything related to that service is Attorney-General. Okay. No problem. I will move on to suicide prevention and mental health, the issue with LGBTIQ+ Victorians and ‘Supporting groups disproportionately impacted by suicide’. It is a line item on budget paper 3, pages 47 and 45. This might be a question for the department. What proportion of that program is focused on LGBTIQ+ Victorians?

Vicki WARD: It is a really important question for you to ask, and talking about the mental health supports that we do have to look after people who are members of the LGBTIQ+ community is really important because we know that it is a vulnerable part of the community when we see around about 67 per cent of Victorians have experienced a form of violence because of their sexuality or their gender identification. We also know that a significant part of that is actually family violence, which folds into the important reforms that we have made, the over \$3 billion investment that we have made. But again, part of this question would also need to be directed to the Minister for Mental Health.

Jade BENHAM: Okay.

Vicki WARD: But what I can talk you through is that in my presentation I spoke to the fact that we have got at least 600,000 Victorians who are queer, and when we look at around 67 per cent of those will have experienced a form of violence because of their sexuality, we realise it is a really serious problem. There is a \$2 million investment over two years into QHub, which provides mental health and peer support services for young LGBTIQ+ people and their families in Geelong, Ballarat, Surf Coast and online. And from memory, I think we spoke a bit about QHub last time I was here, and this funding is continuing because it is a really important program. It is really good outreach.

Jade BENHAM: Yes. That funding, is that part of ‘Supporting groups disproportionately impacted by suicide’, which gets \$5.4 million in 2027?

Vicki WARD: That might be a mental health question.

Jade BENHAM: That is to mental health. Okay. No problem.

Vicki WARD: QHub is about supporting community, providing safe spaces and helping both young people as well as families work through their lives, work through what their lives can look like and how they can create those foundations and that scaffolding around them to help them to be the strongest that they can be, but to also give them pride in themselves and give them that sense of belonging somewhere. And the work that QHub do is amazing.

Jade BENHAM: No doubt. Any plans to set one up in a regional city, such as Mildura, that is a long way removed from Bendigo, Ballarat and the Surf Coast?

Vicki WARD: It is a long way to move, and there are additional services that you would be best to ask the Minister for Mental Health about. But within QHub there is a telehealth service, if you like. So they go to Geelong, they are in Ballarat and they are also on Surf Coast where they have an outpost, but there is also online and phone connection as well. What we have seen is that we have well exceeded performance standards in terms of the expectation of the engagement that we would have with QHub.

Jade BENHAM: Just on that – and this again might be a question for the department – how many people has QHub and the funding supported on average each year?

Vicki WARD: Well, it continues to grow. From memory I think the original target was about 250. It went over to 450. But when we also look at the phone, like what people are doing online, it is in the thousands, I think – about 3000.

Jade BENHAM: Three thousand just online or –

Vicki WARD: No, it is a combination. That number has not been – I do not have data to disaggregate that.

Jade BENHAM: Could you provide that?

Vicki WARD: Yes. The Deputy Secretary might be able to.

Jade BENHAM: Provide that on notice?

Vicki WARD: I think he has got some information for you.

Jade BENHAM: I will move on quickly while you pull those numbers out, if you like.

Vicki WARD: Sorry, I have got it for you.

Jade BENHAM: You have got it? Okay.

Vicki WARD: Yes. For Ballarat, Geelong, the Surf Coast and online it reached 3000 people through services and outreach in 2025.

Jade BENHAM: In 2025. What was it in 2024?

Vicki WARD: I do not have that information to hand.

Jade BENHAM: Can you provide that? I would just like to see the trending over different years.

Vicki WARD: I know it is definitely growing. I mean, that is the anecdotal reporting that I have when I have gone out to QHubs to talk to practitioners as well as to talk to young people, but their scope is definitely growing.

Jade BENHAM: Okay. Do you know from those figures at all how many lives have been saved by the funding provided?

Vicki WARD: That is a really good question, and it is a really difficult one to measure, because you do not know what has not happened. What we do know, though, is that there can be a higher incidence of suicide ideation and suicidal behaviour in a cohort that is often discriminated against, that is often marginalised. And when we have seen the increased volume of hate and vilification, we know that mental health is particularly challenging for the LGBTIQ+ community, so programs like QHub are really important.

Jade BENHAM: Yes. And that funding is mental health, you said. The budget includes funding for groups disproportionately impacted by suicide. Does that all fall under mental health so you cannot speak to what I am reading as budget cuts?

Vicki WARD: No. It is mental health.

Jade BENHAM: It is all mental health. Are you concerned then, from the numbers in the budget paper, budget paper 3, that the program has been cut from \$5.4 million in 2026, it will go down to \$1.1 –

The CHAIR: Apologies, Ms Benham. We are going to go to Mr Galea.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Chair. Good evening, Minister, Deputy Secretary and Mr West. Thank you for joining us this evening. It is always great, Minister, to be able to talk about the equality portfolio, even if it is maybe a little homophobic to be here on Eurovision night, but we will press ahead with what is a very important thing to be talking about.

Vicki WARD: Well, is that the recording? That is the repeat, which I have not seen.

Michael GALEA: The replay, not the live one.

Vicki WARD: I saw Delta Goodrem's on YouTube.

Michael GALEA: Yes – spoiler alert.

Vicki WARD: Sorry. As is normal in a conversation about LGBTIQ+ things, I think we all get distracted.

Michael GALEA: It is perfectly normal for that to come up indeed. I would like to talk about the \$6.5 million in total funding over the next two years under the output of 'LGBTIQ+ Equality Policy and Programs' listed in budget paper 3, page 37. Minister, could you please outline what specific programs this funding will support?

Vicki WARD: Yes. Thank you very much, Mr Galea, for your question. There are some good things that we are funding and we continue to fund in our equality portfolio. We really do appreciate the opportunity to highlight the work that we are doing and what we are delivering to continue implementation of our nation's first comprehensive blueprint to achieve equality for LGBTIQ+ communities, which is, as we heard earlier, *Pride in Our Future*. This budget provides \$3.5 million over two years to deliver Victoria's Pride, including the street party and the regional activation program; \$2 million over two years for QHub, as I was just mentioning to Ms Benham, supporting LGBTIQ+ young people and their families in western Victoria; and \$1 million over two years to continue trans and gender-diverse peer support programs.

This builds on our previous investments, including \$1.5 million over one year in the 2025 budget to support QHub and the trans and gender-diverse peer support program and \$3 million over four years in the 2024–25 budget to ensure continued delivery of election commitments and implement *Pride in Our Future* priorities. These investments, notwithstanding the fact that we are the only equality portfolio in the nation, do show our absolute dedication and commitment to backing projects, services and programs to boost safety and connection and to create events that promote respect, pride and celebration but also offer economic opportunities for the LGBTIQ+ community as well as the broader community. We know that with the amount of events that we have, the amount of people who come to events that we support, we generate tens of millions of dollars in economic improvement, if you like. We generate a lot of money, as we know.

Michael GALEA: Indeed.

Jade BENHAM: Murray River mardi gras?

Vicki WARD: Mate, I am there.

Jade BENHAM: Is it still on the –

Vicki WARD: It is.

Jade BENHAM: I've got it on the record now, Minister.

Michael GALEA: And indeed a perfect segue to my next question, which was actually going to be about supporting regional and rural Victoria. Let us talk about the Mallee. Let us talk about all of regional Victoria. Minister, can you talk to me about the investment, specifically through *Pride in Our Future* and what is being done for regional Victorians?

Vicki WARD: Yes, absolutely. I can do that. We do a lot of stuff actually in regional and rural Victoria. And I hope at some point – I cannot get them out of my head at the moment, Ms Benham, but there are a number of things that we have actually funded out your way.

We know that 11 per cent, or at least 600,000 adult Victorians, identify as LGBTIQ+. That is more than one in 10, and as we know, there will be a couple in this room. We know that, as I mentioned, we are continuing our investment into QHub, worth \$2 million over two years, which supports young LGBTIQ+ people and their families to link to inclusive, wraparound supports in western Victoria, and the trans and gender-diverse peer support program, also delivered online, to improve accessibility for trans Victorians in the regions. In terms of improving health and wellbeing outcomes we have invested \$22.5 million over four years in the 2023–24 budget to advance key *Pride in Our Future* initiatives, including our Rainbow Tick, Pride in Ageing and grants programs. Rainbow Tick is a world-first accredited framework that helps community and mental health organisations embed inclusive practice into their work. The program has engaged 102 organisations since 2023, with 30 regional and rural organisations participating, and the strongest representation is from Loddon Mallee.

I am also pleased to talk about the success of the Pride in Ageing program, providing social support and connection for older LGBTIQ+ Victorians across East Gippsland, Wodonga, Warrnambool and Golden Plains shires. Pride in Ageing reached an incredible 990 older LGBTIQ+ people between July and December 2025 alone, and I look forward to seeing the outcomes of this incredible work. Pride in Ageing is an amazing program. The people who are coordinating it and running it are just exceptional, but the communities that they are creating within regional communities are transformative. We have got older people who have never been to a queer event in their lives turning up to a coffee day, turning up to a variety of things because they feel safe, that they know where to find people. It is just incredible how it is just opening up opportunities for people in regional Victoria to truly be themselves and feel safe in being themselves.

We have also ensured at least 25 per cent of competitive LGBTIQ+ grant funding supports initiatives for regional and rural Victorians to help rebuild respect, safety and connection in every corner of the state. One stream of our equality grants programs is the Pride Events and Festivals Fund, delivering 275 events and festivals since 2018–19, with 32 per cent taking place across regional and rural Victoria in 2025–26. I absolutely look forward to a Mildura organisation applying under this fund so we can get mardi gras up.

Another example is our organisational development programs, supporting Mallee Family Care last year to undertake an essential research project to identify and address their service gaps for LGBTIQ+ people from surrounding and cross-border communities through improving systems, processes and service delivery.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Minister. On page 42 it lists the regional activation program, just to go further on what you were talking about as well. I understand this covers events right across the state but also indeed in outer suburban areas. Can you talk to me a little bit more about what sorts of programs are supported?

Vicki WARD: The regional activation grants are really good, they are very well subscribed and we have regularly exceeded our target in terms of the proportionality of regional communities represented. The regional activation program is fantastic. It ran 15 events and drew almost 10,000 attendees across Victoria just over this year thanks to \$3.5 million in funding over two years.

The 2026–27 state budget continues Victoria's Pride, which includes the street party and regional activation program. It builds on the \$6.8 million over four years in the 2022–23 budget, and we will keep backing these events, projects and celebrations right around the state, whether it is showing local films about queer couples living on the Murray and Darling rivers, set and screened in Mildura, or an art exhibition by emerging local artists also held in Mildura featuring still photography, scripted mini dramas and focusing on narratives around freedom of expression. There was also the incredible Torquay Pride Fest, with local drag performers from the Surf Coast, Geelong and Bellarine bringing their joyful performances to the Torquay Hotel in January. I reckon that would have been a bit of a cracker.

We know people move to Victoria because we are the state that values inclusion and respect in every corner of the state and of course we know that *Time Out* believes we are the best city in the world. As we know, yesterday they also declared that we were the sixth best city in the world for culture, and I reckon that our LGBTIQ+ community contributes significantly to that.

Michael GALEA: There you go. It is good the more you know. Thank you, Minister. I think I need to book a trip up to see Ms Benham in Mildura sometime soon. But if I can ask you about the QHub program further to what you were previously talking about with Ms Benham too, can you talk a little bit more about what sort of services it does provide, both at its onsite locations across western Victoria, but also through the telehealth service?

Vicki WARD: Yes, absolutely. Thank you. There is \$2 million over two years committed in the budget, which builds on the \$1 million that we committed in the 2025–26 budget to continue this program, because we do know that there are real barriers for people to be able to access care when they feel that they may not be welcome. While they may not know whether they are welcome or not – they may well be welcome, but it still holds you back – having a service that is understood to be inclusive, understood to be safe has been a game changer for so many young people particularly.

There are two physical hubs in Ballarat and Geelong and outreach to the Surf Coast. It was named following a co-design process with 350 LGBTIQ+ young people, and was announced on Wear It Purple Day in August 2023. We have seen that program continue to grow and strengthen. An extraordinary number of community members have been in contact with QHub services considering the enormous positive contribution of the program to so many Victorians. There are a number of qualified staff who are at QHub who create programs, whether it is just drop in after school where kids will come in and do stuff, whether it is peer-to-peer support, whether it is organising events. They have had a camp that they have gone on. There are social events as well as that emotional and mental health strengthening work that they do as well. It is a really inclusive, gentle, kind place.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Minister. Changing gears a bit, just in the time I have got remaining, I understand there is also funding that you referred to in your presentation for Victoria's Pride street party.

Vicki WARD: Yes.

Michael GALEA: You did touch on some of the figures, and it made quite a big impact, it sounds like. Can you talk a little bit further to that?

Vicki WARD: It is. It is an amazing event. It is incredibly well attended – over 60,000 people came this year. What is interesting is that, for many of the traders along that part of Collingwood and Fitzroy, it is the biggest trading day that they have got. The place is pumping. It is an incredible event. It is not just inclusive, it is a safe space for the LGBTIQ+ community to have a really good Sunday and have a lot of fun, but it brings in so many people. We had over 60,000 people.

Michael GALEA: Thank you.

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

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you, Chair, and good afternoon. Minister, as you know, an inquiry is now underway into anti-LGBTIQ+ hate crimes occurring in Victoria, including the communication and recruitment methods of anti-LGBTIQ+ influencers and hate groups, following a motion in my name on behalf of Greens colleagues being supported by the house. And I would like to say, from the outset, thank you to government members for supporting that motion and working constructively with me in progressing this important inquiry.

Vicki WARD: Thank you.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Minister, we have seen attacks targeting gay and bisexual men across several states and territories since 2024, and in some instances videos of the attacks being recorded and posted to social media. In particular we have seen reports of attacks on LGBTIQ+ people facilitated through dating apps, with police confirming that anti-LGBTIQ+ influencers have been promoting methods of attack online. This inquiry is a

powerful opportunity to see truth spoken to power, to see lived experience shaping our state's policies and its responses. Minister, will the government commit to implementing any recommendations that arise from that inquiry process, and will we see these recommendations supported by funding in this budget?

Vicki WARD: Thank you very much for your question. I appreciate the work that you have put in, and I appreciate the process that we went through to get the inquiry up. I think that it is a really important opportunity to have a conversation around people's individual experiences and the changes in behaviour that it forces on the LGBTIQ+ community, where we have seen this amplification of noise but also this app-based violence, for example, that is leading people to make choices about whether they decide to use public transport or not, whether they decide to go into a cafe or not, to second-guess so much of their behaviour because of that fear that hovers over them. There is definitely work to do, and this inquiry will talk to it very well, and I look forward to what the recommendations are.

I do also want to note that I think 42 people have been arrested so far for this behaviour, and there have been a number of convictions as well, which is reassuring. I want to thank Victoria Police, who have been the most active police force in the nation. This is not just a problem that is happening here – it is happening around Australia and it is also happening globally. It is a global trend, particularly the app-based violence, so for Victoria Police to take it so seriously is very good. In terms of recommendations, as you would well expect, every recommendation will be considered on its merits, and the government will work through a process of responding to that, but we would have to see the report first.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay, thank you. And with the time I have left, the Pride street party – will we see it funded beyond the estimates?

Vicki WARD: Well, government funds things in the budget, and then it continues to look at following years, but I am really not interested in a scare campaign that is at the moment not needed.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Puglielli. Minister and officials, thank you very much for appearing before the committee this evening. The committee will follow up on any questions taken on notice in writing, and responses are required within five working days of the committee's request.

The committee is going to take a very short break before beginning its consideration of the emergency services portfolio at 5:35 pm. I declare this hearing adjourned.

Witnesses withdrew.