

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the 2026–27 Budget Estimates

Melbourne – Friday 22 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

Luba Grigorovitch MP, Minister for Carers and Volunteers; and

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

Gerry Goswell, Executive Director, Community Inclusion, Veterans and Youth, Department of Families, Fairness and Housing.

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 it is broadcast live on the Parliament's website. The broadcast includes automated captioning, so members and witnesses should be aware that all microphones are live during hearings and anything you say may be picked up, 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 tonight 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 Carers and Volunteers the Honourable Luba Grigorovitch as well as officials from DFFH. Minister, I invite you to make an opening statement or presentation of no more than 5 minutes, after which time committee members will ask you some questions. Your time starts now.

Luba GRIGOROVITCH: Thank you, Chair. I would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners and pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging.

Visual presentation.

Luba GRIGOROVITCH: I am pleased to present on the work of the carers and volunteers portfolio, including the 2026–27 budget. The carers and volunteers portfolio was established in 2023. It supports economic participation and social connection across Victorian communities.

There are more than 750,000 unpaid carers in Victoria. Around 3.3 million Victorians volunteer in some form, contributing more than 732 million hours every year, and young people aged 15 to 24 volunteer at the highest rate of any age, at around 70 per cent. The portfolio funds the programs and places that hold communities together, including neighbourhood houses, men's sheds, food relief, financial hardship support through the Good Money program and the *Victorian Carer Strategy*. Our work is about practical support, helping people and organisations who need it most.

More than \$43 million each year continues to fund around 400 neighbourhood houses across our state, and they provide essential social supports and volunteering opportunities. We released the *Victorian Carer Strategy: 2025–2035* during National Carers Week. The Support for Carers program and additional respite for carers support more than 13,000 unpaid carers each year, with a combined annual investment of \$32 million. Carers come in many forms: foster carers, kinship carers, parents, partners, sons and daughters, who quietly looked up one day and realised that they had become someone else's carer too. Some are paid for their work, but most are not. This portfolio's work reflects that diversity, with targeted supports including funding for Little Dreamers, the peak body for young carers, and a new grants program for First Nations carers.

The Victorian carer card is also a key way we recognise carers. More than 33,000 primary carers now hold a card, which provides discounts on transport, fuel and everyday costs. Last year we made it easier to get the card. Carers can now confirm their status through a statutory declaration, and young carers can have their status confirmed by their school or by a youth worker.

Volunteers are people who choose to give. They show up because they believe in their community. I want to acknowledge all of the volunteers across Victoria for the important work which they do each and every day, from students giving time on the weekends, to retirees running men's sheds, to community members keeping food relief services going.

The second round of the community food relief program delivered 133 grants, including \$2.5 million to 52 neighbourhood houses. Our partnership with Foodbank Victoria includes a \$3 million investment over three years in the Grow program. This is expected to rescue 4000 tonnes of surplus produce. The Good Money program was expanded, with \$5.1 million over four years. A new Good Shepherd store opened in Craigieburn in February. More than 7400 no-interest loans were provided in 2025. The men's shed funding program continues, with \$1 million each year, with 31 grants provided in 2025.

The 2026–27 budget invests \$8.5 million for a third round of the community food security program for food relief and volunteer organisations, including practical help like fuel vouchers so that volunteers can keep supporting their communities. This includes \$6 million in competitive local grants for community- and volunteer-led organisations, including neighbourhood houses and First Peoples-led organisations, and \$2.5 million through a coordination fund to address system and infrastructure gaps in food relief delivery.

This builds on the \$2.7 million immediate food relief package announced in April. The total investment in food relief since 2020 is now more than \$85 million. Over the year ahead we will open the third round of community food security programs in coming weeks. We will continue our partnership with Foodbank Victoria, the Regional Food Security Alliance and the state's regional food shares in places such as Albury–Wodonga, Bendigo, Geelong, Mildura, Shepparton and Warrnambool.

We will expand the Good Money program by adding more local community providers and growing the no-interest loans digital platform with Good Shepherd. We will also continue to deliver the Victorian carer strategy, we will continue to support volunteers under the *Victorian Volunteer Strategy 2022–27* and we will continue funding neighbourhood houses and men's sheds, recognising their role in connecting and supporting communities. To finish, I would like to recognise all of our carers and our volunteers who dedicate their time and resources to helping their communities, their families and of course their loved ones. Thank you, Chair.

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

Jade BENHAM: Thanks, Chair. Welcome, Minister. Good evening. In fact there are a few things in that presentation I would like to talk about. Let us talk about neighbourhood houses first, 'Department Performance Statement', page 44, and the funded hours of coordination provided to neighbourhood houses with no increase. At present many neighbourhood houses are facing closure, and there are around 20 that are going completely unfunded. I know some of the ones in my patch deliver over and above their hours every week because they simply have to and they are angels doing God's work. So why has funding not increased to this important sector?

Luba GRIGOROVITCH: Thank you very much for the question. Sorry, what budget paper?

Jade BENHAM: 'Department Performance Statement', so it is budget paper 5.

Luba GRIGOROVITCH: 'Department Performance Statement' –

Jade BENHAM: Yes, page 44.

Luba GRIGOROVITCH: Page 44. Yes, got it. Thank you. I have to agree with you. Neighbourhood houses are doing God's work. That is the reality of it. I know that in Kororoit I have got four of them that I have visited on frequent occasions, and I suspect that each and every one of you have visited your neighbourhood houses in each of your electorates. I have got commUnity+, Hunt Club, Stevenson House and of course

Westvale. All of them are doing great work, and last week was actually Neighbourhood House Week, and it was a week to be celebrated.

Jade BENHAM: But they cannot do it on love alone, Minister.

Luba GRIGOROVITCH: Indeed they cannot. That is why the Allan Labor government is giving them \$43 million in this budget, and I have got to say I met with –

Jade BENHAM: But that is not an increase, and they need an increase.

Luba GRIGOROVITCH: I met with Keir Paterson last week, the CEO, during Neighbourhood House Week, and I also had the great privilege of inviting many of our neighbourhood houses in for a round table. It was the first time that these network managers had actually met with the minister. They were delighted to do so, and I must say the honour was absolutely all mine.

Jade BENHAM: Great. Are they getting more money, Minister?

Luba GRIGOROVITCH: Well, we had the ability to actually have the conversations about what they are doing. As I said, we invest more than \$43 million each year into neighbourhood houses, and during the budget allocation –

Jade BENHAM: Okay. Just in the interest of time – I have only got 8 minutes – given their plight, you have spoken to them, which is amazing. Thank you for that. But how do these neighbourhood houses survive, particularly the ones out in really rural areas that are vital to the community? How are they going to survive without it, and they desperately need increased funding?

Luba GRIGOROVITCH: Ms Benham, in your own electorate you will appreciate that we fund four neighbourhood houses totalling \$415,000. That was in 2025–26.

Jade BENHAM: We have a few more than that, though.

Luba GRIGOROVITCH: These are Mildura Community House – have you been to that one?

Jade BENHAM: I sure have.

Luba GRIGOROVITCH: Have you been to Murrayville Neighbourhood House?

Jade BENHAM: Yes.

Luba GRIGOROVITCH: Ouyen Neighbourhood House?

Jade BENHAM: Yes.

Luba GRIGOROVITCH: And Red Cliffs Community Resource Centre?

Jade BENHAM: Yes. But then there are Charlton, Sea Lake, Robinvale – there are about 18 of them, I think.

Luba GRIGOROVITCH: There are many. And if I go across the board, we actually have neighbourhood houses in each of your areas. Mr Galea, you have got 72 neighbourhood houses in your area.

Jade BENHAM: Yes, but we are not worried about that. We are worried about their survival, Minister. Are we going to get more money? Because they are going to have to close. They are desperate for more funding. Is there a reason it has not been increased? We know cost of living is an issue. Food relief – they are doing all sorts of food relief issues. They are taking initiatives themselves. These facilitators go over and above the hours they are funded for. They are desperate for more funding and more hours.

Luba GRIGOROVITCH: Yes, and I appreciate all of the neighbourhood houses that are there. As I was about to say, Mr Galea has got 72 in his electorate –

Jade BENHAM: Great. I am sure he knows that they need more money too.

Luba GRIGOROVITCH: and the unfunded neighbourhood houses that have local organisations that are not funded through the programs are encouraged to engage with neighbourhood houses through our \$2 million food relief grants, which were actually announced last week during Neighbourhood House Week.

Jade BENHAM: Is that the proportion of the food relief package that is being specifically allocated to neighbourhood houses?

Luba GRIGOROVITCH: Yes, that is. That is the \$2 million.

Jade BENHAM: And how is that going to be spread across the whole network? Two million dollars is not much to go across the network, but that would be great.

Luba GRIGOROVITCH: I will refer that over to Ms Goswell.

Gerry GOSWELL: We will run a competitive grants process managed by the department. Neighbourhood houses will be invited to apply, and there will be published guidelines. We will be getting that program open early next month, because we recognise the critical need for that funding to flow to the neighbourhood house sector and support their critical work.

Jade BENHAM: Great. Thank you so much, because that was another one of my questions. Really quickly

Luba GRIGOROVITCH: If I can just supplement on that, because food insecurity is just such a huge issue in Victoria today.

Jade BENHAM: Yes, which is why it was one of the questions.

Luba GRIGOROVITCH: Unfortunately, we all know it. In the short time that I have been the minister, I have been to OzHarvest, and, wow, there is an organisation that I have not seen before. SecondBite –

Jade BENHAM: We get all that, but I want to talk about neighbourhood houses, and I have got a couple of other areas I want to cover. Can you say, ‘The value of neighbourhood houses’ – you have spoken about that – but then not provide them with funding to remain open? Because we will see closures in this space. They are really fearful that they are going to have to close their doors because they cannot afford to operate. They cannot afford the overheads if they are having to pay rent.

Luba GRIGOROVITCH: Sorry, what is the question?

Jade BENHAM: Funding for neighbourhood houses, Minister.

Luba GRIGOROVITCH: Yes.

Jade BENHAM: We need more of it. Can you give us some more?

Luba GRIGOROVITCH: Well, we have got \$43 million, which I am absolutely rapt about, through the –

Jade BENHAM: Yes, we know all that, but it has not increased. Inflation is at 4.6 per cent, Minister. We need more funding. Why has it not increased?

The CHAIR: Ms Benham, you have got a short amount of time.

Jade BENHAM: Exactly. Which is I am trying to extract an answer.

Members interjecting.

Jade BENHAM: It has not increased. I am asking why.

The CHAIR: Ms Benham, just afford the minister the opportunity to answer your question. Minister.

Luba GRIGOROVITCH: Thank you, Chair. I was about to get to the crux of your question. We invest more than \$43 million each year through the neighbourhood house coordination program. This supports around

400 neighbourhood houses with 16 networks and the peak body, Neighbourhood Houses Victoria. Now, indexation is applied each year to maintain the real value of investment. In 2023–24 the government also amended the indexation formula for community services organisations to account for Fair Work Commission obligations. In 2024 neighbourhood houses across Victoria reported almost 9.3 million visits and 417,000 activity sessions.

Jade BENHAM: Okay. Thank you, Minister. I have got my answer. I actually want to come back – during the Minister for Ageing earlier in the week I put some questions to her about the 40 per cent cut to respite hours. This is the ‘Department Performance Statement’ on the next page, page 45. There is a 40 per cent cut to respite hours and support, and she indicated that that is under the portfolio of carers. Can you explain the 40 per cent cut to respite hours and support?

Luba GRIGOROVITCH: Sorry, what budget paper was that?

Jade BENHAM: The very next page of the ‘Department Performance Statement,’ page 45. It is under ‘Seniors Programs and Participation’. I asked Minister Stitt about this during the ageing questions earlier in the week, and she referred it to the minister for carers. The 40 per cent cut to respite hours and support, thank you, Minister.

Luba GRIGOROVITCH: Yes. So you are linking that up with what, sorry?

Jade BENHAM: There is a 40 per cent cut in respite hours and support.

Luba GRIGOROVITCH: Okay. The Victorian government provides funding support to older carers through a range of programs, including the recurrently funded Support for Carers program, with grants that total \$760,000.

Jade BENHAM: So this is part of your remit?

Luba GRIGOROVITCH: Yes, it is.

Jade BENHAM: Okay, great, thank you. Because it was very confusing under the heading of ‘seniors programs.’

Luba GRIGOROVITCH: Yes. I appreciate the budget papers are not always that easy to understand, but I am glad that we have got there, that is for sure. I have got to say, providing funding support to our older carers is imperative, as it is to our young carers, and that is something that I think is incredibly –

Jade BENHAM: In there, though, we are missing 180,000 hours. Can you point to where in the budget paper that is made up?

Luba GRIGOROVITCH: What I was trying to say was that our older carers, along with our younger carers and all carers, as a matter of fact, are incredibly important.

Jade BENHAM: So no?

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

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you, Chair, Minister and officials. I want to ask about food relief. I can see on page 37 of budget paper 3, under the output initiative of Families, Fairness and Housing and ‘Community Participation’, there is one there where the government has allocated \$2.7 million in 2025–26 and then \$8.5 million in 2026–27 for ‘Strengthening food security across Victoria’. The description on page 39 sets out that the funding is for Foodbank Victoria, regional foodshares, helping food security systems and infrastructure gaps. Can you walk the committee through what this investment delivers and who it is targeted at?

Luba GRIGOROVITCH: I thank you for your question. Obviously food security is a huge issue for all of us here in Victoria. We do know that. As I was alluding to with the earlier question from Ms Benham, I visited just recently OzHarvest and SecondBite–FareShare, and all of them kept telling me that demand is simply increasing. That is just the reality of it. More Victorians are walking into food banks or neighbourhood houses, and people that thought they would never be in this position are doing that. Just last week I was in my own

electorate of Kororoit at the Hub INChurch pantry. Two families walked in, and one of the women actually stopped and said to me, 'I never thought I'd be in this position. I'm a mother of four, and I didn't think I'd be here.' We are so lucky that our government is investing money into food insecurity to help out those that are in need.

The budget provides \$11.2 million for food relief in two parts. The first part is \$8.5 million for the third round of the community food security program. Of that, \$6 million is available through a competitive local grant stream open to community organisations and open to neighbourhood houses and to First Peoples-led organisations. The remaining \$2.5 million is a coordination fund for systems gaps such as cold storage, transport and also distribution infrastructure. This is obviously going to be quite important. Yesterday I was at the Queen Vic market. I was with Lord Mayor Nick Reece, and we opened up a food storage cold unit – something that is going to see many, many meals on tables to come. I cannot remember the exact figure, but I think it is about a million meals per year. Again, that is something incredibly important. Then with the \$2.7 million immediate package that was announced prior to me taking on this ministry, on 2 April, we have got \$900,000 to Foodbank Victoria; \$200,000 each to OzHarvest and SecondBite–FareShare; \$1.1 million across the Regional Food Security Alliance and seven regional food shares; \$200,000 to Sikh community organisations; and then the last \$100,000 is to Community Information & Support Victoria. With the program, the name has changed from 'community food relief' to 'community food security', reflecting the shift from short-term to longer term security.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you. With that package, that \$2.7 million, what was the impetus for that, and how does it complement the broader package?

Luba GRIGOROVITCH: Absolutely. From what I understand, the package was prompted and directed from the advice from frontline providers such as Foodbank Victoria, which we obviously have quite a good relationship with. I have been to Foodbank Victoria in Yarraville on a number of occasions. Being from the west, it is something that I, the Member for Point Cook and other western suburbs MPs are very proud of. That is now moving down the road and the opening is happening in Altona in a few weeks time. We will both proudly be there, I assume. I know I definitely will be there. Then other providers such as OzHarvest, SecondBite–FareShare and Regional Food Security Alliance are all incredible organisations, and I look so incredibly forward to getting to know each and every one of them even better. Foodbank Victoria supports more than 500 charity partners across the state.

As I mentioned before, on 2 April we announced \$2.7 million for 2025–26 and \$1.1 million to the Regional Food Security Alliance and seven regional foodshares, those being Geelong, Bendigo, Shepparton, Mildura – obviously, Ms Benham that is in your seat – Warrnambool, Wodonga and the Moira shire. \$900,000 went to Foodbank Victoria for distribution. Then \$200,000 each went to both OzHarvest and SecondBite–FareShare. For anyone in this room who does not know, SecondBite and FareShare have actually merged. I was not actually aware of that until I went to their area in Derrimut last week, which I think is in your area, Ms Chair. I went to FareShare–SecondBite and I learned at that time that they merged. Again, it is an incredible organisation. They got \$200,000 in 2024–25 and \$245,000 in 2025–26.

With that funding they established a food rescue hub in Hallam, in the Member for South-Eastern Metropolitan's area, and purchased a new truck. Then between November 2024 and December 2025 the hub rescued over 940,000 kilograms of food. That is equivalent to more than 350,000 meals. That is making a huge difference in Victorians' lives each and every day. The hub serves agencies across Casey, Cardinia, Greater Dandenong, Frankston, Kingston, Knox, Monash, the Mornington Peninsula and the Yarra Ranges. The \$2.7 million in short-term, in-year support and then the \$8.5 million in the 2026–27 budget is the next structured grants round.

Lauren KATHAGE: That \$8.5 million component – I can see under that one there it is grant funding for Aboriginal organisations. Is that a dedicated stream? Why is that important for delivery?

Luba GRIGOROVITCH: Thank you for the supplementary question. Within the \$6 million local grant stream the program includes a \$750,000 allocation for the 2026 budget. It is for self-determined grant stream funding for food security initiatives led by Aboriginal organisations. My favourite part about this stream is that it is to be administrated and appropriated by Aboriginal community controlled organisations, with the provider yet to be confirmed. The food insecurity in Aboriginal communities involves different drivers and different

trusted relationships. These are programs that are not only designed but they are also going to be delivered by the Aboriginal communities and the organisations themselves. One example is the Wathaurong Booln Booln Cultural Centre, which is actually in Geelong. I am looking forward to visiting them in coming months; I think it has been put in my diary. In the Geelong electorate they received a grant of \$97,000 through the 2025–26 community food relief program, and with that funding they are delivering quarterly community meals.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you. Looking at your presentation and the information about your priorities for your new portfolio, I was really glad to see that a focus on the regions is there. The \$6 million over two years – what sort of impact do you think that is going to have for regional Victoria?

Luba GRIGOROVITCH: The \$6 million over the two years is absolutely going to help with the Regional Food Security Alliance. This is something that is obviously incredibly important to our government. We know that in the regions there is a lot of food insecurity, and it is so important to us to make sure that meals are being delivered down there. Again, I feel like I am harping on about OzHarvest, SecondBite–Foodshare, but these are organisations that are actually partnering up so that they can deliver food. I will give you one example. OzHarvest, who I visited in Port Melbourne, were telling me how they often get food delivered from Derrimut from SecondBite. If they have got, say, excess bananas that week, they might make a whole bunch of foods to do with bananas. Or excess carrots – they might make a whole heap of carrot soup. SecondBite will then deliver that from Derrimut up to OzHarvest in South Melbourne, and from OzHarvest they will then deliver it down to the varied regions. Having a regional focus is obviously incredibly important, and that is why the Allan Labor government has decided to dedicate \$6 million over two years to the six regional Foodshares.

Lauren KATHAGE: On the same slide, there is information about a Grow program. I must admit I do not know about the Grow program. There is an investment there of \$3.3 million. What does the Grow program deliver?

Luba GRIGOROVITCH: The Grow program is a very exciting program. I am glad you asked me about that, especially on Friday night at PAEC – again, I thank you all for your work. The Grow program is a partnership which is between the Victorian government and, again, Foodbank Victoria. I feel like a bit of a broken record here. It works directly with farmers to rescue their surplus farm produce and redirect it to food relief services. The government provides \$3 million over three years to the Grow program, with a target of more than 4000 tonnes of fresh food that will be rescued. From July 2025 to March 2026, the first nine months, Foodbank has already rescued and redistributed 645 tonnes of fresh produce through Grow. That produce flows through Foodbank, through the network and through their charity partners and sees food parcels in community meals, in household kitchens and in areas that absolutely need it.

I know that in each of our electorates we do have those pockets that are desperately in need and that do suffer from food insecurity. Again, going back to the Hub INChurch and also commUnity+ in Kororoit, I spoke to the commUnity+ CEO yesterday who was telling me that food insecurity is huge and having an option to be able to go to that option with Grow through Foodbank Victoria is something that is going to be paramount to them.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you. We are very lucky in my community to have Whittlesea Community House, who do a fantastic food support program in the local area involving local farmers and the local secondary college, so everyone in the community is benefiting while at the same time serving the community.

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

The committee is going to take a short break before beginning its consideration of the portfolio of youth at 7:50 pm. I declare this hearing adjourned.

Witnesses withdrew.