

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

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Lauren Kathage

Aiv Puglielli

Richard Riordan

Meng Heang Tak

WITNESSES

Sonya Kilkenny MP, Minister for Violence Reduction; and

Andrea Davidson, Chief Executive Officer, Violence Reduction Unit, Department of Premier and Cabinet.

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.

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 Violence Reduction, the Honourable Sonya Kilkenny, as well as DJCS representatives. Minister, I am going to invite you to make an opening statement or presentation of no more than 5 minutes, after which time the committee will ask you questions. Your time starts now.

Visual presentation.

Sonya KILKENNY: Thanks very much, Chair. I am joined by Andrea Davidson, who is the CEO of the Violence Reduction Unit. The VRU was established last year with a \$19.8 million initial investment. Why now? Because we are seeing a new type of offending that needs a new approach, and the VRU has a clear mandate to stop crime before it starts, because community safety is the Allan Labor government's number one priority. We know that the VRU model is effective. It is based on a tried and tested approach from Glasgow and London. The Glasgow VRU has driven a 60 per cent reduction in violent crime within 10 years, and over seven years London's VRU had a 31 per cent drop in homicides and a 28 per cent drop in knife crime resulting in injury among young people. The VRU works directly with young people, families and the Victorian communities most impacted by violence. It uses police intelligence and data to find and address the root causes of crime, coordinates existing crime prevention programs across governments and develops and delivers new programs to address gaps and emerging crime trends. One such initiative is the suite of lived-experience mentoring programs, in which we are investing \$7.75 million over four years to expand as a flagship program of the VRU. It is called 16 Yards, and it is delivering a cutting-edge group-based mentoring program for young people in youth justice, supporting that really crucial transition between custody and community. It is a 14-week rehabilitative program, and it is delivered by skilled facilitators with lived experience of the youth justice system. To date 16 Yards has completed the first cycle of this program at Parkville Youth Justice Precinct, and I know Andrea can probably talk more about that during the course of today.

Another key VRU program is the anti-gang grooming and exploitation campaign, in which we have invested \$500,000 over two years. This campaign helps families and teens spot the signs of grooming early and gain the tools to say no and get help. Think Village will run the nation-leading program and deliver community workshops designed with local leaders. This work ties directly in with the government's response to arson attacks on licensed venues and other businesses to prevent young people from getting involved in offending, especially those like we have seen who have had little to no prior involvement in the justice system. And while I am touching on the VRU's work in this space around the arson offences, it is worth mentioning that an expert from the Violence Reduction Unit will also be embedded in VicPol's state command and coordination centre, and they will work to disrupt the grooming and exploitation of young people who are being targeted to commit these arson offences.

The 2026–27 budget continues our important investment in the VRU by providing \$33.45 million over four years. There are five components to the investment, which we can talk through: community connection, Project Restore, targeted mental health support, quality activities and sport for at-risk school-age kids and new local crime prevention solutions. I am going to talk about Project Restore briefly, but we are happy to talk about the

other programs as well. Project Restore is based on a really successful immersive program in New York City, and the community-based gang violence intervention program was touted by the Brooklyn District Attorney as helping to deliver ‘the safest year in Brooklyn’s history’. In the US Project Restore delivered an estimated 28 per cent reduction in shooting victims and a 22 per cent reduction in felony assaults in the community. We have invested \$3.71 million over two years to pilot Project Restore. That builds on an investment we made last year of \$500,000. This program will directly address conflict and will reconnect young people with community through mentorship, intensive wraparound support and pathways into education, training and employment.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Eight minutes are going to Ms Benham.

Jade BENHAM: Thank you, Chair. Minister, budget paper 3, ‘Service Delivery’, page 5, in that table, just for budget paper reference: on 23 April the government said the Violence Reduction Unit is here to stay. But given the figures in that table, how does that fit, given that 93 per cent of the funding allocated will be spent by 30 June 2028?

Sonya KILKENNY: Thank you, Ms Benham, for the question. Last year in out-of-cycle budget we provided, I think it was, around \$19 million to establish the Violence Reduction Unit. We have never seen anything like this in Australia. This is truly nation leading, and I am really proud of the work –

Jade BENHAM: Sorry to interrupt, but is that part of the \$15 million that is listed in that table for 2026–27? Because there is nothing in fact –

Sonya KILKENNY: No. \$19 million was included last year as part of 2025–26, and \$33 million is being funded in this budget of 2026–27.

Jade BENHAM: Then in 2028–29 and over the forwards that funding is chewed up. So is it ongoing or is it just for the forward estimates period, the Violence Reduction Unit? Do you expect to have solved the violence issue by 2028?

Sonya KILKENNY: This will be dealt with as we deal with all programs of this nature. It is funded for the forwards. But this is important work. This is nation-leading work that is already delivering impacts and change in our communities.

Jade BENHAM: How do you measure that?

Sonya KILKENNY: I will come to that, but I want to acknowledge Andrea Davidson, who has hit the ground running and has not wasted a moment here in bringing together programs to make that direct impact with local communities.

Jade BENHAM: Great. Can we talk about specific metrics? How do we know? How is it going to be measured whether it is working or not? What are the specific metrics?

Sonya KILKENNY: Well, as I said, we are already seeing results.

Jade BENHAM: How do we know?

Sonya KILKENNY: I can point to that because, for example, part of the work of the Violence Reduction Unit what is called the rapid response. You might recall in January that –

Jade BENHAM: Sorry, Minister, just in the interests of time, do we have specific measurables or data points? I know you love data. Do we have specific data points that are being measured that we can look at quarter to quarter?

Sonya KILKENNY: Well, thank you for that. I was pointing to outcomes that have already been delivered through that rapid immediate response both in Fitzroy and also more recently in Mernda with the death of Aidan Becker at Mernda train station. Obviously, this work does not happen overnight, and we have only stood up the Violence Reduction Unit, but I will get Andrea to talk through what is going to be the manner in which success is measured.

Jade BENHAM: We would love the metrics, please.

Sonya KILKENNY: I will pass over to Andrea. Thank you.

Andrea DAVIDSON: Thank you, Minister. So as the minister mentioned, in terms of the impact and outcomes – and we heard this in reflection on the Scottish and London violence reduction units – population-level outcomes take time to achieve. But in terms of the impact and outcomes framework that we are building and developing, it goes to three tiers of impacts and outcomes, which will all include metrics to demonstrate and track impact across the short, medium and long term. So that is looking at initiative-level impact. For example, for the lived experience mentoring program that the minister has mentioned, there is an immediate evaluation associated with each of those programs that will provide us with those types of metrics.

Jade BENHAM: Great. Are we able to get – is there a table or something that those metrics are collected in? Are we able to see those?

Andrea DAVIDSON: That is what is currently being developed, very clear –

Jade BENHAM: Great. So they are not developed yet?

Andrea DAVIDSON: They are in the process of being developed for each initiative. As the initiative is being rolled out, they are delivered. But we are also looking at not just each initiative, we are looking at the system-level impacts. So we are actually measuring whether the VRU is successful in its system connector role over time. And then that really important medium- to long-term population-level impact that will show us the really deep impact.

Jade BENHAM: Great. When are we likely to be able to see the first dataset?

Andrea DAVIDSON: So the impact and outcomes framework is in robust development at the moment. A really critical part of also informing the framework is our data and intelligence work, which is baselining activity that is occurring across government. It is a really important process to undertake to ensure that we have that baseline understanding, to then be able to deliver those metrics against.

Jade BENHAM: Sure. Okay. Terrific.

Sonya KILKENNY: And I should also add that there will be performance standards from next year, given we only created the portfolio in April. And also, of course, crime statistics is another way that we will see –

Jade BENHAM: In regard to establishing the unit, who was consulted in establishing the Violence Reduction Unit? What stakeholders?

Sonya KILKENNY: This has been work that has been undertaken by government working through experts in Victoria Police, in youth justice, but also drawing very heavily on models that we know have worked overseas. I took the committee through those examples of the Violence Reduction Unit in Glasgow and in London that have been running now for some time and delivering quite extraordinary results.

Jade BENHAM: Great. You spoke about youth justice then, and this is in part why the Violence Reduction Unit was established, so why then is the government shutting down other youth programs designed to do exactly the same work over the same time? Is it a consolidation? How did we come to that conclusion?

Sonya KILKENNY: I do not agree that we are cutting programs at all. What I am here today to talk about is additional investment we are making, from establishing the Violence Reduction Unit to now expanding that with a significant investment in this budget of over \$33 million to invest in programs –

Jade BENHAM: Just to be clear, just for some clarity, you do not agree with the statement that individual youth justice programs or youth mentoring programs have been closed down or defunded?

Sonya KILKENNY: So the budget that we are talking to today invests more than \$33 million into the Violence Reduction Unit.

Jade BENHAM: Yes, but I am talking about the other ones that have been defunded – we think, we suspect – to add to that \$33 million investment.

Sonya KILKENNY: Well, I do not know if you have or you will be speaking with the Minister for Youth Justice, so I am sure you can put those questions to him. But today I am here to talk about the significant investment we are making in the Violence Reduction Unit, which is transformative. This is nation-leading, and it really is coming about because we are witnessing a new trend –

Jade BENHAM: In the interest of time, again – sorry to cut you off – can we just talk about 16 Yards really quickly? What metrics are in place to measure 16 Yards's success?

Sonya KILKENNY: Well, I think Andrea just took you through some of those.

Jade BENHAM: So, same. Okay. That is fine. What steps have been taken to satisfy the department that all mentors and staff participating in this program have appropriate checks in place?

Andrea DAVIDSON: So, as with all the programs that are delivered by government, we are absolutely embedded in the child safe standards practice. So the work that is done by 16 Yards is subject to those processes.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Davidson. We are going to Mr Tak.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you, Chair, Minister and officials. I refer to your presentation. The government set up the Violence Reduction Unit at the same time as it announced serious consequences for violent youth offending under adult time for violent crime. Minister, can you tell us about how the government came to the decision to establish this unit, and why now?

Sonya KILKENNY: Thank you. This is something I was raising earlier in answer to a question from Ms Benham. We have taken a position that we need serious consequences. We need serious consequences in response to some of the serious, high-harm repeat offending that we are seeing, offending being committed by younger and younger children and more serious and escalating violence and offending. We have done that by introducing two tranches of significant bail reform but also introducing serious consequences through the introduction of adult time for violent crime, which commenced in February this year. I took the committee through that in my role as Attorney-General and how that is a significant adjustment and change to the justice system and the way that we deal with young offenders in the justice system.

At the same time, we know that the best way to prevent crime is to intervene early, and that is why, alongside serious consequences, we wanted to develop mechanisms and measures to identify and to intervene early as a way of preventing crime. It is trite to say, but the best way to deal with crime is to prevent it happening in the first place, and I think when we are talking about children there is no better point than that. These are young people whose lives are fully ahead of them. If we can get in early, intervene early, prevent them progressing down that criminal justice path and turn those lives around, then we all benefit from that kind of intervention.

The work of crime prevention and early intervention is not new for this government, and we have seen that work roll out through various programs through youth justice. But what is new is the need for a unit, bringing that unit together as a bit of a systems connector across whole of government, and we are doing this now because what we are seeing are new trends in offending by young people that we have not experienced before. These new trends are really concerning and really alarming: younger and younger cohorts of children offending – offending that is serious offending, often first-time offending, so kids, children who are not known to criminal justice or the justice system at all coming in and escalating to very serious and violent offending. This is new. It is not unique to Victoria, but it is new. It is happening nationally and internationally as well.

An added dimension to that is something that we spoke about in the context of the recent arson attacks. That is where we are seeing unidentified criminal gangs who are recruiting and targeting these young people to carry out these very serious criminal offences, knowing that it will be the kids who are going to be picked up and charged and dealt with through the criminal justice system. So intervening early – and we have the example here of Think Village, a program that gets into communities, working with families, working with them. I met them out in I think Footscray. It is an incredible group of people, again with lived experience, who can talk to the signs, the impacts from it and what community and what families need to do to address it and to stop it before it happens.

This is grassroots, on-the-ground work, working with those communities to empower them, so we are shutting off this avenue for criminal gangs to recruit and rely on these really young offenders. And as I said in my presentation, the mandate of the Violence Reduction Unit is to stop crime, prevent crime, before it happens, and we need to do that by getting in as that systems connector, identifying what works but working with communities to identify what is going to be best to work on the ground. As I said, we are not just plucking this out of thin air. We are adapting models that have been really successful in other jurisdictions and taking really the best of those models and creating our own violence reduction unit here in Victoria. As I said, it is here to stay, with a significant investment of \$33 million to really show we are backing in this Violence Reduction Unit to give Andrea and her team the skills and the resources to enable it to really succeed. We are going to drive home and deliver results by driving down the rates of young people getting caught up in the system. I do not know, Andrea, do you want to add anything to that?

Andrea DAVIDSON: I think the really important role, as the Attorney said, of the Violence Reduction Unit is as a system connector. There is a lot of investment in crime prevention, but what we know really works is connecting those different parts of the system to that work and ensuring that that work is really well integrated. The Attorney also touched on the fact that the Violence Reduction Unit is an innovator as well. A lot of that innovation does come from elsewhere, but a lot of it is also grassroots and home-grown, and a really good example of that is the program expansion that was announced this week in relation to the Community Connectors program, which is actually an absolutely Victorian, grassroots, home-grown program that, through connection with the Violence Reduction Unit and partnerships with community organisations and transport, we have been able to demonstrate can have a really positive impact on what we know is a very much current challenge of safety on our Metro system.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you, Minister, and thank you, Ms Davidson. When will we start to see results? I mean, how are you going to measure success or what is success going to look like?

Sonya KILKENNY: Thank you. We talked a bit to this in answer to Ms Benham's question. I think, too, if we look at the premise, the objective, behind the Violence Reduction Unit, it treats violence as a public health issue. By doing that, it means we look at this as something that is entirely preventable, not inevitable. I think it was one of the co-founders of the VRU in Scotland who flagged that. It is entirely preventable, and therefore the best way to treat this is as though it is a public health matter. So that is getting in there, identifying the risks, wrapping your arms around them and giving them the tools and the support to sort of really turn those lives around and never concede that this kind of violence is inevitable. We are looking at the power of community to work with community to really help drive this as well, and empowering those communities to deliver the kinds of results we want to see for these young kids.

But on reducing crime, I mean, often you do not know the numbers of crimes that have not been committed. That is the whole point of this, right? We want to ensure that the crimes are not ever committed in the first place. Yes, over the long term crime statistics are going to show us. But as Andrea took us through, it is really looking at those layers of success and outcomes through the local initiative to the suburb level, to the population kind of level where we know we have nailed it in terms of 'This is the approach.' We will keep delivering, we will keep finding best practice, the best models, the best programs to get out there to work with communities to really deliver on these results. The kids are worth it, right? We are all worth it. It is so important to get in there early with a unit that is whole of government, that is connecting everyone together to make sure that our investment in the programs are delivering the kind of results that we want to see.

Ultimately, getting to these kids and turning their lives around keeps all of us safe, and that is the absolute objective here with serious consequences on the one hand with all of the reforms that we have made to bail and to adult time for violent crime. But at the same time the very important work of the Violence Reduction Unit is to drive in the early intervention, turn those lives around and help these kids get back on the right track.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you, Minister. That is a very important measure, and we are looking forward to seeing a result. As a parent with young kids, many of the parents in my community are also reaching out with similar concerns. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Tak. Mr Puglielli.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon. On budget paper 3, page 5, I might start with the CEO of the VRU just because I feel like we have not heard from you too much in the session today. The VRU has been allocated \$33.4 million in this budget. Are you able to outline how much of that funding has been allocated to Pasifika-led organisations?

Andrea DAVIDSON: In terms of the 2026–27 budget, of the additional funding that the VRU has received, there have been portions of that funding that are already assigned. Project Restore is one of those. I think that is a really important project to outline if we are talking specific to the Pasifika community where that will absolutely have impact and outcomes for the Pasifika community. We know, for example, a number of the mentors that work for 16 Yards are proud Pasifika young people who have turned their lives around. We also know that as a big part of the additional investment we will be looking for innovative programs that respond specifically to the challenges within certain communities, so there will undoubtedly be the opportunity. I know I have had meetings with members of the Pasifika community to really take a bit of a stocktake of things like the really impactful Le Mana Pasifika program and how we draw on the learnings from that program.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: So that is potentially in the future Pasifika-led groups rather than the groups you have outlined. Can I ask about Aboriginal-led organisations?

Andrea DAVIDSON: Yes, absolutely. We have a specific Aboriginal engagement strategy in the Violence Reduction Unit, which has been built through the course of our establishment alongside the First Peoples' Assembly, Aboriginal Justice Caucus and VACCHO. With the Violence Reduction Unit taking a public health approach, we need to ensure that the way that that strategy is reflected is reflective of a genuine wellbeing, whole-of-life-course model. Taking a public health approach is about ensuring that we are not just focusing on the justice end of the spectrum. Our Aboriginal-led model sees us have two dedicated positions within the Violence Reduction Unit. We are currently recruiting to those positions, but we also, for example, have VACCHO, VALS, Koorie Youth Council and Aboriginal academics on our partnership collective, which is informing the work that we are doing within the Violence Reduction Unit.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay.

Sonya KILKENNY: You had your first meeting.

Andrea DAVIDSON: Yes, just yesterday.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Can I also ask: of that \$33.4 million, how much goes to programs with no Victoria Police involvement?

Andrea DAVIDSON: We are at the moment working through how we spend that money and really that stocktake of understanding what programs could we, for example, expand or bring to scale and what portion of programs might be new and innovative programs, so it is a –

Aiv PUGLIELLI: It is not yet determined.

Andrea DAVIDSON: No.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. Is it an intention of the program that that would be the case?

Andrea DAVIDSON: No, certainly not the intention. One thing that I would talk to in terms of the interface with Victoria Police is –

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Apologies, Ms Davidson. Ms Davidson and Minister, thank you 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.

The committee is going to take a break now before beginning its consideration of the portfolio of consumer affairs at 1:45 pm. I declare this hearing adjourned.

Witnesses withdrew.