

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

Paul Edbrooke MP, Minister for Cost of Living; and

Lisa Gandolfo, Deputy Secretary, Consumer Affairs and Local Government,

John Batho, Deputy Secretary, Digital and Government Services,

Nicole Rich, Executive Director, Regulatory Services, and Director, Consumer Affairs Victoria, and

Jaklin Trajkovski, Executive Director, Regulation Policy and Dispute Services, and

Rachel Altmann, Executive Director Portfolio Strategy and Priority Projects, Department of Government Services.

The CHAIR: I declare open this hearing of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee and 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, and 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 will be placed on the committee's website.

I welcome the Minister for Cost of Living the Honourable Paul Edbrooke, as well as DGS. I find that so difficult to say. 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.

Paul EDBROOKE: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, committee members, for the invitation today. Can I begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we meet today and pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging. And I acknowledge and pay my respects to any Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people who are present or watching today's hearing.

Donald Trump's war in the Middle East is driving up prices at the pump and putting Victorian families under even more pressure – pressure that was already there from two interest rate rises and rising inflation. Government are doing everything we can to help now. That is why this government has created a dedicated cost-of-living portfolio, the first of its kind, and why this budget has committed more than \$2.5 billion in cost-of-living support for Victorians. Easier, safer, more affordable – that is the test we have set for ourselves, and this government's budget delivers against it.

Rent and mortgage repayments are the single biggest line item in household budgets, so this is where we put the serious money: \$860 million into the Social Housing Growth Fund, building more than 7000 additional social homes over the next decade – that is funded, that is contracted and that is happening; \$98.74 million to launch the Victorian renter rights program, local advice services, an older persons housing rights service and a new renters helpline expected to help more than 25,000 renters; and as I previously mentioned, the portable rental bond scheme launching this year means renters will not have to find a second bond before the first is returned. Also we have the Rental Dispute Resolution Victoria organisation making disputes faster, fairer and free.

With Trump's war pushing up fuel prices, getting to work has become genuinely expensive, especially for families in the outer suburbs and regions where driving is not optional. This budget invests \$1.2 billion to ease that pressure. We have already delivered two months worth of free public transport. From June, fares are cut in half, saving the average daily commuter more than \$850 before the end of the year. A full daily fare drops from \$11.40 to \$5.70. The 20 per cent rego rebate is almost here, with up to \$186 in the back pocket per car, or up to \$372 for families with two vehicles. And the fair fuel plan, backed by \$5 million, keeps the pressure on price gougers at the pump through mandatory price reporting and the Servo Saver app. Also, kids under 18 travel

free, V/Line fares are capped, and there is also \$481 million for regional transport services. Real help right now when it is needed.

When energy, groceries, insurance and rates rise all at once, families cannot cut their way out. They need targeted support, and that is what this budget delivers: \$90 million for the transition to cheaper renewable energy, including the utility relief grant scheme for households in bill stress and an expanded energy upgrades program. Through our energy investments, Victoria now consistently has the lowest wholesale power prices in the country. There is \$120 million for families with children, free kinder savings up to \$2600 per child and school breakfast clubs feeding kids at more than 1200 schools. That is now more than 55 million healthy meals since its inception in 2016. And the savings finder tool on the Service Victoria app gives every Victorian a personalised list of every rebate and discount they are eligible for – simple, fast and free.

Victorians are doing it tough, global forces are making it harder, but this government is not standing still. We are doing everything we can with every dollar in this budget to make life easier, safer and more affordable. I welcome the committee's questions.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. We are going to go to Mr Riordan.

Richard RIORDAN: Thank you, Chair. Minister, the cost of living is really important – more important than ever before. You have outlined some of the things you are doing, but you have not outlined or given us some rationale for some of the things you are not doing in cost of living. I refer specifically to the fact – just where we started, and the opposition has been big on this – that your government has brought in 63 new taxes and charges on Victorians, many affecting the cost of rentals, affecting the way people do business, taking more money out of people's pockets each day. Do you see it as your role, and will you tell this committee what you are actually doing to talk to your colleagues about stopping increasing tax?

Paul EDBROOKE: Thank you for the question, Mr Riordan. I will just put on the record that this government has altered and removed taxes as well at quite some pace. The constant conversation between ministers in cabinet and people in the caucus of this government is about how we can make life easier and more affordable for Victorians. And I would even put my hand out to opposition members: if you have suggestions on how we can make targeted cost-of-living relief, we would love to –

Richard RIORDAN: Minister, we can talk about that, but we often get our debates cut short in the lower house – you know that. Can I go to some of the other things that I want to know what you are doing about and whether this budget caters for them. We heard this week about the public housing private trap, with some of the most lowest income, most vulnerable people in your public housing system being forced into private rentals, costing them thousands. What is your cost-of-living approach doing about that? Are you talking to the housing minister and saying, 'Look, great mate, old buddy, friend, this isn't good enough. We're doing a lousy job.' Are you taking that up for people on cost of living?

Paul EDBROOKE: Well, I am not saying those words to the housing minister, and I think I am familiar with the situation you are talking about, which I think you brought up with the housing minister previously. What I would say is that within this portfolio, the cost-of-living portfolio, whether it is 20 per cent off vehicle registration, whether it is the fair fuel plan, saving people money, whether it is –

Richard RIORDAN: Well, let us talk about the cost of fuel saving people money. Regional Victorians, people out in Geelong and the west: we have hardly had a train work this year, and when the trains do not work, elderly people, who have to get to hospitals, doctors appointments, people who are telecommuting, people working from home – a signature policy of yours. If you have worked from home in my electorate for the last month and a half, you have had to get into your petrol- or diesel-fired car and drive an hour minimum to Geelong in order to get to Melbourne to work, if that is what you do, or to your doctors appointment. Is that a cost-of-living –

Michael Galea interjected.

Richard RIORDAN: No, I am talking about cost of living. These are practical cost-of living-issues.

Michael GALEA: Why didn't you raise these issues when you had the opportunity?

Richard RIORDAN: I am. I have got the cost-of-living man, the man responsible for making sure your government policies do not hit people where it hurts the most – the hip pocket.

The CHAIR: Excuse me.

Members interjecting.

Richard RIORDAN: Can I have some protection here please, Chair, from this noisy rabble over here who are trying to justify out-of-control costs –

The CHAIR: Excuse me. Members to my right!

Members interjecting.

The CHAIR: Mr Galea! Mr Riordan, your protection has been given.

Richard RIORDAN: Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Can you please ask a question to the minister within his portfolio?

Richard RIORDAN: One last one that we have not seen: we have seen this government hand out money to try and overcome the ballooning cost of living in Victoria. We have had an energy rebate. We have had some free public transport. You have rattled off a few things. You have used money that you have taken from the 63 new taxes, and you have dished some of it back out to people. You have dished it out to people primarily as long as they have got a computer and know how to use the internet and know how to use emails and even have access to it. But we know, Minister – certainly the Member for Mildura and I – that in remote regional areas many people do not have access to that. What are you doing in this budget to make sure everyone who is entitled to one of your freebies can actually get it?

Paul EDBROOKE: Thank you for the question, Mr Riordan. I would start by saying it is not just people in those regional areas that are not connected to a digital device like a phone or an iPad or a computer.

Richard RIORDAN: So where do they go?

Paul EDBROOKE: Certainly in my patch in Frankston we have an older cohort of people in the community that have that issue.

Richard RIORDAN: So where do they go?

Paul EDBROOKE: What we have as far as the Service Victoria app –

Richard RIORDAN: No, no. The app does not work, so do not talk about the app.

The CHAIR: Excuse me.

Richard RIORDAN: My question specifically –

The CHAIR: I really think the minister is attempting to answer your question. You just keep going with more and more interjections over the top of him. The minister to provide his answer.

Paul EDBROOKE: Thank you, Chair. We have provided funding to CISVic to help people access digital services. There is also that \$2.4 million I spoke about in a previous portfolio here in regard to CISVic.

Richard RIORDAN: Have you done anything for the neighbourhood houses? Because they would like to try and help with this, but you have cut their funding.

The CHAIR: Excuse me. Stop interjecting. He is responding to you with a specific example.

Richard RIORDAN: I am just asking –

The CHAIR: Stop.

Paul EDBROOKE: This is something that I think is quite common amongst everyone in this room. We all see people who will come to our electorate offices and ask us how we do this.

Richard RIORDAN: So what are you doing?

Paul EDBROOKE: The funding for CISVic, the \$2.4 million, is designed to help engage with those people that are not necessarily digitally connected, Mr Riordan.

Richard RIORDAN: Okay. Someone in my electorate who is 3 hours from Melbourne – how do they access the support from CISVic to fill in their rego discount form and their energy rebate form and have access to that?

Paul EDBROOKE: I might hand to the Deputy Secretary to give you a more accurate description of what is available there.

Richard RIORDAN: We can learn together, Minister.

Lisa GANDOLFO: Thanks, Minister. In terms of different digital applications, the Department of Government Services has a call centre that people can call, and they can be assisted from anywhere they are.

Richard RIORDAN: How many forms of ID would they need to access the support if they rang your call centre?

Lisa GANDOLFO: How many forms of ID to get information or how many –

Richard RIORDAN: I want to get my rego rebate. I am an elderly digitally disconnected pensioner who has lived all my life in Victoria, paid my taxes. I want to get my rebate. How do I get it?

Lisa GANDOLFO: Whilst I think the rego rebate is being delivered by the Minister for Government Services, I will throw to my colleague John Batho.

Richard RIORDAN: Okay. Let us throw to someone else – Mr Batho, is it?

John BATHO: It is Mr Batho.

Richard RIORDAN: Batho.

John BATHO: I think the Minister for Government Services mentioned in her PAEC hearing earlier in the week that we are going through the final design and accessibility plan for the rego rebate scheme, and she did make the point there will be support available through the contact centre.

Richard RIORDAN: There will be what?

John BATHO: Support.

Jade BENHAM: There will be a call centre.

Richard RIORDAN: A call centre. Okay. But my question is: how many forms of ID would an elderly digitally disengaged person need to access your call centre when it is up and running between 9 and 5 Monday to Friday?

John BATHO: For which transactions, Mr Riordan?

Richard RIORDAN: Just any. I just want to access one of the minister's wonderful cost-of-living measures, one of his improvements that is making my life easier. I want to know how I get it.

John BATHO: Depending on which scheme you are applying for and the different transactions, there are different authentication and identity requirements.

Richard RIORDAN: Give me an example.

Paul EDBROOKE: Mr Riordan, I would also say CISVic have 54 networked agencies across the state to help as well.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Riordan. I do hope your constituents go to your office.

Richard RIORDAN: They do.

Jade BENHAM: They do, which is why we know it is a problem.

Paul EDBROOKE: I thought Mr Riordan was describing himself.

The CHAIR: Mr Tak.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you, Chair, Minister, officials. With the disposable income on essentials, budget paper 2 on page 41, chart 3.3, shows the shares of gross disposable income that Victorian households spent on essentials. Minister, could you explain to the committee what this data is telling us about cost-of-living pressures that are facing Victorians and how it has informed the investments the government has made?

Paul EDBROOKE: Thanks for your question, Mr Tak, and I sure will try. Chart 3.3, I think, is one of the most important pieces of data in this budget, and it might be a little bit hard to perceive, because it does not just tell us that the cost of living is hard and abstract, it tells us who is actually bearing the burden and where most of that burden falls most heavily. What the chart shows us clearly is that for households in the lowest income quintile, essential expenses – housing, food, transport, energy and health care – consume a far greater share of their disposable income than for those at the top of the quintile. This year's budget has been deliberately designed with that reality in mind – it is targeted. The 2026–27 budget delivers around \$2.5 billion in cost-of-living supports and housing initiatives – not spread thinly across all Victoria regardless of need but targeted at the essential categories where pressure is the greatest and to households that have the greatest need.

The chart also reinforces something this government has long understood, Mr Tak, and that is cost of living is not a single problem with a single solution. Housing, food, transport, energy, health care – these are distinct pressures requiring distinct responses. That is why this budget contains a comprehensive suite of measures across each of those essential categories.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you, Minister. Given that chart 3.3 shows housing is the single largest essential expense for low-income households, consuming around 26 cents in every dollar of disposable income, Minister, could you please outline what this budget does to ease housing cost pressures for Victorians who need it most?

Paul EDBROOKE: Thank you, Mr Tak. I think a lot of people find that figure of 26 cents in every dollar of disposable income going towards housing as the single largest essential expense in low-income households surprising. Housing is, as the chart makes plain, that single largest cost pressure. It is not a statistic that you can look at as a government and not take action on. We know that the best way to drive down rent is to build more homes, and that is what we are doing. This budget invests a further \$860 million over five years into the Social Housing Growth Fund, directed towards more than 7000 additional social housing homes over the next decade. That also builds on major investments already delivering more than 16,000 social and affordable homes across Victoria as well, with construction on more than 12,000 of those already underway or complete.

For renters and those experiencing housing stress, this budget provides \$6.1 million to support vulnerable renters to maintain their tenancies, helping to stop them from becoming homeless in the first place. I think we can all agree that prevention is better than cure – better than meeting someone at the bottom of the cliff. For those who already are without a home, we are also investing \$26 million for additional emergency accommodation and nine new outreach teams to support rough sleepers, with \$15 million to provide stable, long-term supported housing across five sites in Victoria.

For aspiring home owners, the government continues to provide the very popular \$10,000 first home owners grant and stamp duty exemptions for eligible buyers, along with extended concessions for off-the-plan purchases that I know have been spoken about in this room recently. They save buyers money whilst adding to that housing supply as well. We will also crack down on underquoting, requiring real estate agents to publish

the seller's reserve price before the auction, so buyers are not wasting time on properties they never had a hope of buying.

Through the Suburban Rail Loop – Australia's biggest housing project, with tunnelling commencing in 2026 – we are delivering more homes in train and tram zones close to transport, work and services. That first stage alone of the SRL will help deliver around 70,000 new homes over the next 30 years. Housing affordability will not be solved overnight, but this budget definitely takes us materially closer.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you, Minister. Food is the second-largest essential expense for low-income households, consuming around 16 cents in every dollar of disposable income. Minister, again, could you outline what this budget does to help those households put food on the table?

Paul EDBROOKE: Thank you for the question, Mr Tak. I met with eight agencies and organisations that provide food yesterday, and it was a great discussion around what we are doing now but also what we could possibly do in the future to provide relief to families. As you pointed out, food is the second-largest essential expense for low-income households, and unlike some costs it is one that cannot be deferred, reduced or gone without. When food takes 16 cents in every dollar of disposable income, for the lowest quintile there is simply no slack left in the budget for anything to go wrong, and this budget responds to that reality in several ways.

The first is we are investing \$11 million to strengthen food security across Victoria with grants for community organisations to deliver food relief and ensure it reaches those who need it most, because we know the people on the coalface doing this job already do it the best. This is a direct investment in the network of food banks and community relief organisations that Victorians turn to when budgets are at breaking point.

We are also continuing the immensely popular school breakfast programs, with \$14 million to ensure that families can have a child go to school and get a breakfast and participate in the school day with a full tummy, listening and ready to learn. This directly reduces the pressure on household food budgets for some of Victoria's most vulnerable families, and as a former teacher and as a local MP, I have, as I am sure you have, seen this work so well in schools, and the feedback about learning is also something that teachers talk about – the effect on learning.

More broadly, the \$45 million targeted package for communities who need it most, which includes \$15 million to boost allowances for kinship, foster and permanent carers, recognises that cost-of-living support must reach households facing the sharpest pressures. I know that there are some people in the room here now that know how close to my heart, as a foster carer, that is. Foster carers certainly do not do this for the money. They do it because they care and they want to see kids who have had some of the worst deals in life make a good life. Food, alongside shelter, is the most fundamental of the pressures we see in communities, and this budget takes it seriously.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you, Minister. Transport is another help that this budget outlines. Minister, could you outline what this budget does to reduce transport costs for those specific Victorians?

Paul EDBROOKE: Thank you, Mr Tak, for that question. We have previously spoken about this. We have spoken about public transport; we have spoken about the fuel saver app. But what this government is trying to do is ensure that across the board, whether you do take public transport or you have no option but to drive, there is something in this budget for you. Low-income households are more likely to live further away from employment centres and more dependent on public transport, if it is available, or cars when it is not, which means the relief we provide as a government matters more for them.

This budget delivers \$1.2 billion to ease transport costs for Victorians, and it is one of the most significant cost-of-living investments in the state's history. We have already provided \$155 million to make public transport free for everyone in April and May, and together with the Commonwealth and other states we have delivered a three-month 61 per cent reduction in the fuel excise as well, down 32 cents a litre. Now, this budget invests \$759 million to provide a 20 per cent rebate on vehicle registration fees, and I have previously spoken about it but it bears repeating again: \$186 per car, up to two cars; that is \$372 straight in the back pocket to provide things for your family. That is for all Victorians who registered and paid their light vehicle registration between July 2025 and June 2026. We are also investing \$278 million to halve the price of public transport on trams, trains and buses until 1 January 2027. For families with children, free public transport for all under-18s on all Victorian services has been in place since 1 January 2026, and it is the one thing I hear about in my family

home from my children. And for those who drive, the Servo Saver feature on the Service Victoria app has been very popular. It has been used by more than 540,000 Victorians since October, and it is estimated to save users up to \$333 a year as well. Anti-price gouging laws now require fuel retailers to publish a daily price cap in advance as well. Transport should connect Victorians to opportunity, not drain their budget and their opportunity in getting there.

Meng Heang TAK: With the remaining time, Minister, perhaps in short: the assistance with energy and health care that this budget provides?

Paul EDBROOKE: Thank you, Mr Tak. I think we will be running out of time, but on direct concessions, around \$566 million in concessions will be provided in the 2026–27 budget to eligible households.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Mr Puglielli.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon, everyone. We were just talking about food relief earlier; can I ask, of the \$8.5 million allocated to food relief initiatives, will any of that investment go to the Community Grocer?

Paul EDBROOKE: To the Community Grocer?

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Yes, servicing Fitzroy, Richmond, Carlton and Flemington.

Paul EDBROOKE: I do not have that information on me, Mr Puglielli, but I am more than happy to take that conversation offline and hear more about this organisation.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Could you come back on notice with a response? Is that possible?

Paul EDBROOKE: If there is some information at hand, I am happy to come back and give you that.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. That would be appreciated. And if you are doing that, perhaps the Wellington as well, another organisation.

Paul EDBROOKE: Yes, the Wellington. No worries.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Yes. Thank you. Can I ask: do you anticipate having any direct carriage of legislation in the Parliament under this portfolio?

Paul EDBROOKE: Yes. This portfolio is one that is about bringing the threads together across portfolios. Of course people do not experience cost-of-living pressure through silos and portfolios, so in some ways this very important portfolio is about coordinating some of that. But I do expect to be bringing some legislation before the house. We –

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Would that be this year?

Paul EDBROOKE: I am hoping so, Mr Puglielli, yes.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: We wait with excitement. Is there any specific funding in the budget that you have direct oversight of for this portfolio?

Paul EDBROOKE: As far as direct funding, obviously we have got what I have talked about previously, the financial counselling programs, CISVic, those programs that are under the DGS are under this portfolio. And I will throw to the department Deputy Secretary if you want to fill us in on some more.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Is that an exhaustive list, or are there more that you could outline?

Lisa GANDOLFO: Cost-of-living initiatives from this budget that would fall under this portfolio, as the Minister said, would be the financial counselling matters, which are shared with Consumer Affairs; CISVic; and the Bring Your Bills days; as well as Servo Saver.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. Thank you. Are there any objective indicators the portfolio uses to measure outcomes or success that could be shared with the committee?

Paul EDBROOKE: As I have said, across a number of portfolios there will be outcome measures, and there will be some outcome measures in the targets that we have just talked about or the funding that we have just talked about too that we could share with the committee. There will be some of that that will be able to be shared in the future, probably in another quarter, but we are certainly open to doing that.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. Anything further you can provide on that at this stage?

Paul EDBROOKE: I might throw to the Deputy Secretary on that one.

Lisa GANDOLFO: I probably do not have it with me, on how we are measuring those programs –

Aiv PUGLIELLI: On notice, perhaps.

Lisa GANDOLFO: but I can take that on notice. Those programs are definitely evaluated, so we will have data.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Perfect. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Minister and officials, thank you very much for taking the time to appear before the committee this afternoon. 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 men and boys at 3:40 pm. I declare this hearing adjourned.

Witnesses withdrew.