

# **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 Men and Boys; and

Dannii de Kretser, Deputy Secretary, Social Policy, and

Sudha Joseph, Executive Director, Social Policy, Department of Premier and Cabinet.

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

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

I advise that all evidence taken by the committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. However, comments repeated outside 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 said may be picked up and captioned, even if said 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. Verified transcripts, presentations and handouts will be placed on the committee's website.

I welcome the Minister for Men and Boys the Honourable Paul Edbrooke and officers from DJCS. Minister, I invite you to make an opening statement or presentation of no more than 5 minutes. This will be followed by questions from the committee. Your time starts now.

### Visual presentation

**Paul EDBROOKE:** Thank you, Chair, and thank you to the committee for the invitation to appear before you once again today. Can I begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which this hearing is held today, the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people of the Kulin Nation, and pay my respects to elders past and present. I also acknowledge and pay my respects to any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are present or watching today's hearing.

I am really excited to serve as Victoria's first Minister for Men and Boys – really proud – the first minister for men and boys in our nation's history. This is an opportunity to make a real impact for men and boys in our community, and it is an opportunity to start a conversation that I believe is long overdue. Our dedicated focus on men and boys is about creating new opportunities to help them reach their full potential. That means focusing on the practical things that shape outcomes in their lives: mental health and wellbeing; education, training and jobs; and the local communities and relationships that keep men and boys connected. The portfolio will partner with community, with sector and with other portfolio ministers to consider how we can leverage existing services and address any gaps in services that can help boys grow into healthy men, because that is the key. Our dedicated focus on men and boys is not to say that we should divert attention away from the very real issues of women's safety and gender equality. There are dedicated prevention of family violence and women and girls portfolios that will continue this extremely important work. This government has actually led the way in gender equality through introducing landmark legislation and targeted investments in economic, healthcare and safety reforms, and we will continue to do so. I firmly believe that the work in this portfolio can be complementary to all that we have achieved and will continue to achieve together to create a safer, happier and healthier future for both men and women.

While men and boys are not a single group with a single experience, the data tells us a story we cannot ignore, and, personally, I think it is a warning. On a mental health and wellbeing note, males account for 72 per cent of suicides in Victoria. In 2025 that was 72 per cent; it increased in 2026 to 74 per cent. More than four in five

gambling-related suicides are men, and men are twice as likely to die from an overdose. Around 63 per cent of men and boys do not reach out for support, unsurprisingly, which tells us the way support is understood and accessed by men matters – and opportunity matters too.

Victoria is nation leading in its NAPLAN results, which is a credit to our wonderful teachers and educators. This portfolio will build on that strength, helping boys and young men stay engaged, succeed and move into clear, positive pathways through education, training and employment. This includes recognising where workforce demand is strong and supporting young men into those opportunities. For example, 87 per cent of the construction workforce are men, but trade apprenticeship completion rates are not keeping pace with workforce demand.

Connection and participation in community life are also a key part of our focus. In 2024 18 per cent of men aged between 16 to 85 years experienced social isolation. Strong local connection through sport, mentoring and community participation helps build positive connections. As you can see, that is why we invested further across these areas in the 2026–27 budget, building on previous investments. To support strong mental health and wellbeing this includes \$46.8 million to make sure everyone can afford and access mental health care. This includes \$30 million for new and existing mental health hospital-in-the-home beds to enable more people to access home-based acute inpatient mental health care; \$6.5 million for prevention of suicide initiatives; \$5.4 million to continue the youth outreach and recovery service, Victoria’s dedicated statewide outreach service for young people with complex mental health challenges; \$4.9 million to support mental health and wellbeing locals; \$104 million on initiatives to reduce alcohol and drug harm, which also includes \$32 million on a range of initiatives to continue to mitigate the harms of alcohol and other drugs across Victoria; and \$10 million to upgrade Victoria’s mental health, alcohol and other drug facilities. For education pathways into training and employment it includes \$10 million to continue literacy and numeracy early intervention programs for primary school children.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Minister. I am going to pause there. We are going to keep to time. Deputy Chair.

**John PESUTTO:** Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon, Minister and Ms de Kretser. When I google – or control-F, rather – all of the budget papers to look for ‘men and boys’ or even the term ‘boys’ it does not come up with any returns. Minister, isn’t it true that the only Act – I will come to other portfolios in a moment – for which you have shared responsibility under the general orders, dated 16 April, for which you are partially responsible, is the *Scout Association Act 1932*? It is a 20-page Act that has not been amended since 2007, if I am not mistaken. Can you tell me about what your responsibilities are under that Act?

**Paul EDBROOKE:** Thank you for the question, Deputy Chair. As I said in a previous hearing, this portfolio is about bringing a bunch of threads together, and it is something that is happening across international lines right now. More and more people are switching on and governments are switching on to some of the issues we see surrounding men and boys. In that way, as I have said previously also, the issues that surround men and boys are not so much defined by portfolios and silos, they have got to be across government. We have got to operate across –

**John PESUTTO:** I take your point, Minister. Can I then ask: you would agree, wouldn’t you, that the behaviour of men and boys and the cultural issues that you have identified – that a lot of us have identified; it is a common discussion – should form part of the broader discussions we have about gender equality and male behaviour in terms of domestic and family violence? You would agree with that, wouldn’t you?

**Paul EDBROOKE:** I think we can walk and chew gum at the same time, Deputy Chair.

**John PESUTTO:** Of course, but as a fundamental proposition. Sorry, Minister, I just want to clarify and establish for our viewers that you cannot really achieve gender equality and real progress on family and domestic violence, can you, unless you are really addressing the challenges around male behaviour and cultural challenges facing male behaviour for men and boys? You would agree with that, wouldn’t you?

**Paul EDBROOKE:** I think through the various royal commissions into family violence and the royal commission into mental health we have seen not just anecdotal evidence but hard data that suggests that we know what the problem is and what we are talking about.

**John PESUTTO:** And we have got to bring men and boys into this discussion. Is that true? Minister, I am just trying to get to a particular point. Isn't it true that we have got to bring men and boys into this discussion? It is true.

**Paul EDBROOKE:** I would agree with you.

**John PESUTTO:** Yes. So, Minister, can you tell us then why you do not appear to have been involved in any way in the preparation of the 'Gender Equality Budget Statement', which contains a foreword from the Treasurer and Minister for Women, as it should, but does not include anything from you and the contribution that your work in this field will bring. Don't you think that is a major shortcoming.

**Lauren Kathage** interjected.

**John PESUTTO:** The Minister has just agreed with me.

**Lauren Kathage** interjected.

**John PESUTTO:** The Minister just agreed with me. Sorry, Minister.

**Paul EDBROOKE:** While I agree with you, Deputy Chair, I would say that the timing of this portfolio would be problematic with that argument. But also there are plenty of authors and international players that are now saying that while we have focused on gender equality and ripping down a structure of patriarchy, what that has left is a bit of a vacuum. In that, we see improper players influencing and co-filling that. And right now, whether it is in Europe, in Northern Europe, in America, in the UK or in Scotland, governments are saying that we actually need something specific for men and boys.

**John PESUTTO:** I could not agree with you more, Minister, which is why I am trying to establish, as important as the issues are, and I think we all agreed on the things you have just discussed, why it is that it appears that what you have is more a title than a substantive role, given that all of the legislative oversight, the programming and the delivery of important services in this area are really covered by the ministers for education, mental health, vocational education and training, youth, family violence and health more broadly. Isn't that the case? I am worried that what you have got is a title without a substantive role underneath it, and were it otherwise, you would actually have more under your oversight.

**Paul EDBROOKE:** Deputy Chair, worry no more. This portfolio is supported through existing departmental resources and coordination of government, much like some other portfolios. Multicultural affairs would be one of those where there is a cross-portfolio resourcing and coordination across government to meet aims that do not neatly fit in the boxes that are, I guess, our sociological frameworks or portfolios.

**John PESUTTO:** Can we test that then, Minister? Men represent over 90 per cent of workplace deaths. Is this an issue that, within your view of the portfolio, will also be included in the next 'Gender Equality Budget Statement'?

**Paul EDBROOKE:** Well, that would be a matter for that particular minister, but what I would say is with the suicide rates of men more than double that of the road toll, this is not something to look on lightly. We need to take action. I would actually put it out there that if this was any other portfolio, we would be jumping up and down. 572 men committing suicide last year – that is a blight on our community. It is something we need to action on, and that is –

**John PESUTTO:** Absolutely true, Minister. Will you be bringing your own submissions on these issues, or will you be, if you like, accompanying the work of other ministers? Will you do your own thing on this, given the things you have just described?

**Paul EDBROOKE:** Thank you for that question, and the answer to that is yes. I think you know me well enough, Mr Pesutto, to know that I leave no door unopened and unknocked in anything I do. I am certainly very, very passionate about this portfolio, because I truly believe that we can make an impact, and we have the opportunity right now to make an impact on some of the terrible statistics we are seeing. But also it is very timely when we see some of the things that are happening globally. We have got the chance to influence young boys and men to actually become healthy adults, and that goes to family violence as well. For many, many years we have all seen the royal commission recommendations rolled out, and one thing I think that we can take

right now as an opportunity is a course of education where we can role model for young men what masculinity is and not make masculinity a –

**John PESUTTO:** I am grateful for that, Minister. Can I just ask, finally: how do you and the Minister for Youth coordinate this? Because going to that ministerial overlap, there are shared objectives of course, but it seems to me that the Minister for Youth would be covering off on a lot of this as well. Are we risking a lot of duplication here and not achieving what we need to achieve?

**Paul EDBROOKE:** I understand your question, Deputy Chair, and I understand that concern, but I will assure you that whether it is through the department or the Minister for Education, the Minister for Youth or the Minister for Women and Girls, there will be no duplication. We will be trying to ensure that we take every opportunity and no stone is unturned to make change.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Mr Hilakari.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** Thank you, Minister, and thank you, Ms de Kretser. This has been a long week of a long set of hearings. I apologise. Minister, being the first holder of the position within the country of Minister for Men and Boys I think is a real honour, and it is a place that is really important to fill. I am glad that this government is recognising the need to fill this space. Could you tell the committee what the government is trying to achieve through the establishment of this portfolio and how it does complement the existing work on gender equality and women's safety? What are the measures that are in the budget for men's behaviour change?

**Paul EDBROOKE:** Thank you for the question, Mr Hilakari. I would actually preface this by saying the New South Wales opposition leader, who I have spoken to about this, is in line with our way of thinking, as are the federal government with their position for men and boys and men's health. Can I start by also saying, though, as I have said before, that I am so proud to be in this position – the first such minister in our nation's history. It is a portfolio I am committed to not just as an MP but as a father, as a firefighter, as a former teacher, as a foster carer, because the data is really confronting. The statistics are really confronting: males account for 72 per cent of suicide deaths in Victoria, going up 0.2 per cent this year; almost three in four alcohol-induced deaths are men; men are twice as likely to die from an OD; and 63 per cent of men and boys not reaching out for help when they need it or knowing where to turn in fact is a real problem that we can improve upon. In 2024, as I said, we have got that stat of 18 per cent of men experiencing social isolation, up from about 14 per cent a decade ago. Things are not getting better, and that is why the government has made this the first portfolio for men and boys in Australia. This is about school; it is about community life – the things that fundamentally shape outcomes. As I have previously spoken about, there are three interconnected areas that I can identify and speak about here: mental health and wellbeing, education and employment with pathways, and connection and participation in local communities. It is absolutely clear to me that our government agenda must tackle the issues of boys and men in those areas.

Having a men and boys portfolio definitely, though, does not diminish our commitment to gender equality and women's safety at all; it is complementary. The 2026–27 budget invests \$4.8 billion to strengthen gender equality in Victoria, Mr Hilakari. The prevention of family violence and women and girls portfolios will contribute to this critical work, and they will continue to do so. But as I have said, I firmly believe that this portfolio can be complementary, because boys who grow into healthy, connected men are far less likely to perpetrate violence and more likely to be positive contributors to their families and communities. A simple way of putting it is: young, healthy boys become healthy men, and it keeps Victoria safer and it keeps Victoria happier.

The Commonwealth's own national men's strategy from 2020 to 2030 identified men as a priority population facing distinct barriers to healthcare access as well. The strategy specifically called out factors including cost, the availability of services outside work hours and a tendency for men and clinicians, interestingly, to not recognise that behaviours associated with traditional masculinity can actually be indicators of common mental health conditions as well. The portfolio will work in partnership across government, with community and with the sector to leverage existing services, identify gaps and build on what works. And now is a great time to shout out to the Man Cave, Movember, the Men's Table, the men's sheds and all these organisations that do great work so we do not need to reinvent the wheel a lot of the time. But Victoria is the first jurisdiction in Australia to respond with a dedicated ministerial portfolio. It is definitely not a symbolic gesture; it is a structural commitment to treating men's health and wellbeing as a policy priority in its own right.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** Minister, one of the things I find in the work that I do is the most important part of it is listening, and in establishing the new portfolio area I expect that is going to be a really big part of this establishment phase. What is your intent for hearing directly from men, getting out and about in our community and hearing those experiences directly?

**Paul EDBROOKE:** Thank you for that question. I think you have gone to the heart of this portfolio, Mr Hilakari, quite efficiently. On building a strong focus on men and boys, I know we as MPs like to get up in the chamber and have our say, but this portfolio is a lot more about listening. It is about stopping and actually sitting down with men and boys and the organisations that are already on the ground tackling some of these pretty insidious issues. I have always been a believer, and I have said it to you and members of this committee before, that the best, most effective policy is not written by someone in a department – although we love our department officials – who is given an issue to solve that they know nothing about. We have people in our community that are leaders, that can help us solve these issues, and we need to hear directly from them, from families, from teachers, from sporting clubs and community organisations, about what is working, what we can leverage, what we can force multiply and where the gaps are as well. And that is why I will be engaging and already am engaging with communities across those schools, across workplaces, across our union sector and across community organisations to hear firsthand about the opportunities, the pressures and the experiences shaping men and boys and their lives today, including the very real influence that has come to light of online environments that can really harmfully shape young boys. This engagement will inform how we connect up the significant investment in this budget with existing investment and make sure it is genuinely delivering outcomes that can make change. It is also about giving men and boys a voice in shaping policy conversation, because this portfolio only succeeds if it is grounded in the lived experience and reality of the people it is designed to support. That is common amongst a lot of portfolios, but certainly that is what I have found in this one already.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** We are not starting from scratch in a whole bunch of areas, and mental health is one that you have mentioned a few times now, particularly in relation to deaths by suicide and the three in four alcohol-induced deaths being men. You also mentioned in your presentation four in five gambling-related suicides, a number that would be familiar to members of this committee through our previous work. What is the budget already doing to invest in men's mental health and the mental health of boys as well?

**Paul EDBROOKE:** Thank you for that question, Mr Hilakari. I did not know anyone watched PAEC, Deputy Chair, but for our viewers at home I probably should offer a trigger warning, because we are talking about some confronting issues here. Obviously there is Lifeline on 13 11 14 if anyone feels uncomfortable or uncertain or just not right about these things. Those feelings are totally valid.

As a teacher it always broke my heart to see any kid, but especially young boys, disconnect, because once they disconnect it is so hard to bring them back. As a firefighter I could not tell you the amount of male suicides I attended, and even anecdotally then we knew there was something wrong. We would go back to the fire station and say, 'Why is it always men?' We always knew that. And from the perspective of a son, I have seen the effects of suicide and suicide attempts in my family. So with that 72 per cent of all suspected suicide deaths being men, a figure that has risen by 2 per cent in this year already, it is very obvious that if we do not do something, this trend is going to get worse.

The research also tells us why these gaps exist. Australian longitudinal studies have found that only 37 per cent of males with anxiety, mood or substance use disorder accessed help from a health professional, compared to 55 per cent of females. So the 2026–27 budget invests \$46.8 million to ensure that everyone can afford and access mental health care, because that is key. It includes \$30 million for new and existing mental health hospital-in-the-home beds, enabling more people to access home-based acute inpatient care; \$6.5 million for suicide prevention initiatives; \$5.4 million to continue the highly successful youth outreach and recovery service for young people with complex and long-term mental health challenges; and also \$4.9 million to support mental health and wellbeing locals, and I can speak, from my work as a Parliamentary Secretary for Mental Health and Suicide Prevention, which informs a lot of my work in this current space, to their success. We have also got more than \$6 billion invested in the mental health system since 2018 following the royal commission, and that supported the Victorian suicide prevention and response strategy for the next decade as well. That was developed with lived experience input, including from a group dedicated to adult and older men as well.

In a lot of the research we see and a lot of what we see in this portfolio, some of the answers are already there; we have just got to tease them out. We do know that barriers for men and boys in accessing health services are structural as well as cultural – costs and appointments that are not available outside work hours mean a tendency to not actually access help.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** Thank you, Minister.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Puglielli.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon. Findings from the *Ten to Men* study of the Australian Institute of Family Studies have shown that one in three men, or 35 per cent, self-report using intimate partner violence. To your understanding, Minister, having this portfolio, are we seeing similar trends here in Victoria?

**Paul EDBROOKE:** Thank you for the question. Without having particular data in front of me on that right now, I will not try and draw a picture for you. My understanding is we have some consistent trends there, certainly with intimate partner violence. As I have said, we have a huge opportunity with this portfolio working in conjunction and complementary to the equality portfolio and the portfolio for women and girls to make real differences across the board. I will not be locking myself into any kind of silo or even, dare I say, portfolio approach. When change needs to be made, when we are saving lives, we need to be doing everything we can across the board, intersecting across portfolios and working in partnership with community groups to make that change happen and to save lives.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Okay. Thank you. Can I ask about existing initiatives like Respectful Relationships in our schools and What Kind of Man Do You Want to Be? Those types of campaigns – are they landing with men and boys?

**Paul EDBROOKE:** Yes. The answer is predominantly yes. I can say this certainly from the data that I have seen and that is publicly available but also from anecdotes with teachers I know. Certainly, there are programs like the one you mentioned. There are plenty of great programs out there. Part of the issue we have is actually getting that peer review so we can actually look at data that is trustworthy and in line with other data sets as well so we can measure it.

As far as Respectful Relationships, my take on that is that it has been highly successful, and there should be other jurisdictions that actually take that up, because the best way to make healthy men is to make healthy boys. Two thousand schools have actually signed up to that program, and it has been evaluated as being very successful. Certainly, it is a program that when I was teaching I wish we had, because you could see teachers and schools trying to do that work themselves, but to have a program put in place by the state government and the policy and the reforms behind it certainly has put us in a better place than some other states.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Minister and Mr Puglielli. Minister and Ms de Kretser, thank you very much 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.

I do want to say that this hearing today may have included reference to and discussion of suicide, which some of our viewers could find distressing. I encourage all those in the room or watching online to practice self-care and consider your own support needs. If you or a loved one needs support, the following services are available to you: if you are in a situation that is harmful or life threatening, contact emergency services immediately on 000. If you are not in immediate danger but you need help, you can call Beyond Blue on 1300 224 636. For our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who need support, call Yarning SafeNStrong on 1800 959 563. For our LGBTIQ+ people who need support, you can call the Rainbow Door on 1800 729 367.

The committee will take a break before beginning its consideration of the portfolio for corrections at 4:25 pm. I declare this hearing adjourned.

**Witnesses withdrew.**