

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the 2026–27 Budget Estimates

Melbourne – Thursday 21 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

Anthony Carbines MP, Minister for Racing; and

Emma Cassar, Secretary,

Bill Kyriakopoulos, Deputy Secretary, Community Safety, Victims and Racing,

Nicola Quin, Chief Operating Officer, and

Lisa Saxton, Director, Office of Racing, Department of Justice and Community Safety.

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, any comments you say outside of this hearing may not be protected by this privilege.

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 Racing the Honourable Anthony Carbines as well as officials from DJCS. Minister, I will 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.

Anthony CARBINES: Thank you, Chair and committee members. I would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we gathered, the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation, and pay my respects to their elders, past and present. I would like to extend that acknowledgement to Aboriginal people with us today.

Visual presentation.

Anthony CARBINES: Racing continues to make a significant contribution to the Victorian economy. A 2022 report into the size and scope of the industry stated that the Victorian racing industry contributes \$4.7 billion annually to the economy and generates 35,000 full-time equivalent jobs. A significant proportion of this is in regional Victoria. The Melbourne Cup Carnival maintains its status as a pre-eminent major event, generating \$533 million in gross economic benefit to Victoria. The carnival stimulates economic activity in the tourism, accommodation, fashion, grooming and retail industries, to name just a few. We remain committed to the ongoing support of the industry.

The Victorian Racing Industry Fund supports the industry to maintain and improve the quality and safety of racing and training infrastructure across Victoria. It also has a strong focus on supporting regional racing clubs through the regional racing events program and the regional customer facilities program. The Major Racing Events Fund supports clubs to develop or secure new or expanded events and encourage economic activity. Since July 2025, \$13.61 million has been provided to the industry to co-fund 180 projects. This includes \$5.95 million for projects to upgrade training and racing infrastructure such as \$117,000 for the tie-up stall upgrade at Warracknabeal, \$695,000 for the Bendigo Harness Racing Club stabling roofing project and \$220,000 for the Sale Turf Club's horse precinct. The tie-up stalls upgrade program provides regional clubs the opportunity to apply for a grant of up to \$100,000 to support upgrades to customer facilities. In 2025–26 \$1.6 million has been approved to support 40 clubs to upgrade their facilities. It includes grants to support upgrades at Mildura, Tambo Valley and Great Western, as well as \$30,800 to upgrade the jockey and administration building at Gunbower, \$30,700 to support the Mansfield Racecourse hospitality pavilion project and \$92,000 to support the Ballarat Bray Raceway lift replacement project.

The regional racing events program provides grants of up to \$20,000 to support regional clubs to put on great racing events for fans and local communities. This year funding of \$1.4 million has been approved to support 65 regional racing clubs to hold 109 racing events. This includes funds to support the 2026 Echuca Cup, the Stawell harness Good Friday event and the Bendigo Greyhound Cup. In 2022 the government committed \$15 million over three years for the Major Racing Events Fund. Between 1 July 2023 and 30 April 2026, \$14.71 million has been committed from the MREF to co-fund 44 major events in Victoria. The program will be fully expended by 30 June this year. \$5.5 million has been committed so far in 2025–26. This includes support for the Dream Chasers Festival, the Caulfield Cup Carnival, the Melbourne Cup Carnival and major regional race events at Ballarat, Cranbourne, Pakenham, Geelong and Mornington.

There is more that I could say about our racing industry and the support that it provides to our community, Chair. In particular can I say and reiterate that it is the driver of jobs and investment in communities, not just in Melbourne but across the regions, in particular the use of our racing club facilities that we invest in not just for race day activities but for weddings and funerals, for significant occasions and for other volunteer organisations when the clubs throw their doors open to make them available. They have also been used around emergency management support and other gatherings of people in our community. I know that that that has also been the case in our metropolitan suburban clubs at Cranbourne for some very significant activities that I know Mr Galea would be very well aware of. A few of our colleagues in the south-east would know that throwing the doors open and our investment in our racing clubs and our facilities is about making sure that those facilities can be used for the community more broadly, not just for racing activity.

Can I say also that I am looking forward to another significant Melbourne Cup Carnival and remind colleagues that the Melbourne Cup Carnival is not just about what happens in the city. It is a whole leveraging of regional racing events that happen and activities across regional Victoria that leverage off what is the most significant and largest major event in Victoria. It is bigger than the Australian Open, bigger than the grand prix. I like to remind people that the Melbourne Cup Carnival is the largest major event in Victoria. Thank you, Chair.

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

Jade BENHAM: Thank you, Chair. Minister, by the sounds of everything you have just said about local racing facilities, it sounds like you are in a yes mood to grant the Mildura harness racing facility a new lift for their pavilion – no? No response. Yes, that is what I thought.

Anthony CARBINES: We are always available to make sure that Victorian Racing Industry Fund, the \$72 million is in partnership with –

Jade BENHAM: It was not a serious question, Minister. It is fine. It is, but it is not for here.

Anthony CARBINES: That is a shame.

Jade BENHAM: I do want to talk about harness racing.

John PESUTTO: He is not ruling it out.

Jade BENHAM: No, he has not ruled it out, so that is great. That is on the record. I do want to talk about harness racing though, because the Mildura Harness Racing Club, as you know, is a very active harness racing club, and Harness Racing Victoria is in a world of pain. I do want to talk about this. I refer to ‘Department Performance Statement’, page 97, where it talks about a sustainable racing sector. The harness racing industry, as we know, has made it very clear that its survival does depend on the sale of land at Melton Park, which is adjacent to the track there. After they have repaid the government debt that they owe, the full remaining balance will be returned to the industry to ensure their survival. That is the preferred outcome for everyone but, as we know, the former Treasurer had made changes so that any revenue raised from that sale or the proceeds of government land goes back into consolidated revenue. Minister, can I ask, as racing minister, why you cannot guarantee that outcome, which would save the industry?

Anthony CARBINES: The outcome being, sorry?

Jade BENHAM: That the sale of the land at Melton Park goes straight back into Harness Racing Victoria rather than into consolidated revenue after the debt has been paid off.

Anthony CARBINES: Well, there are a couple of elements. Thank you for the question. Firstly, we should outline that Harness Racing Victoria and the industry provide some \$600 million in economic activity to Victoria. It generates some 4500 full-time equivalent jobs, so it is critical, and particularly the team in Mildura do a great job and have for very, very many years. The government has provided some \$86.8 million to Harness Racing Victoria – a very significant amount of money. Some of that has been through advances in funds for solvency because of the financial issues they have had and the Treasury Corporation of Victoria, so a loan of some \$41 million through to the taxpayer which they –

Jade BENHAM: Yes, which they want to pay back with the sale of this land, Minister. You know, this is a pretty simple solution. Can you guarantee it?

Anthony CARBINES: What I say to you is that the government has provided very substantial amounts – tens of millions of dollars – to Harness Racing Victoria. I have reshaped and reappointed and appointed new people to the board, and it is being ably led by Bernard Saundry as the chair. I want to thank the team of people for the work they have done to make sure that the annual report comes out into this financial year, but Harness Racing Victoria should demonstrate that it is standing on its own two feet, that it is financially sustainable, and that is because of the \$86 million that we have provided to support them and the leadership of Bernard and the executive team. Harness Racing Victoria is a statutory authority, and it is subject to the government's landholding policies. Those policies are overseen by the Minister for Finance, and they are the best person to answer questions about landholdings.

Jade BENHAM: Minister for Racing, please. After they repay that debt, Harness Racing Victoria as the statutory authority, will you guarantee that the balance will go to Harness Racing Victoria to save this industry and all those jobs that you just spoke about?

Anthony CARBINES: The fact that the government has provided \$86.8 million to save harness racing in Victoria –

Jade BENHAM: But they will pay that back with the sale of this land.

Anthony CARBINES: The money that has been paid by the government to Harness Racing Victoria is a clear demonstration of our support for 4500 full-time jobs and an economic contribution of \$600 million. Harness Racing Victoria have the full support of our government. It is demonstrated by an \$86 million financial commitment, and rightsizing the organisation. Land at Melton continues to be held by Harness Racing Victoria and is subject to the government's landholding policies as a statutory authority, and the taxpayers have contributed some \$86 million to support.

Jade BENHAM: So it will not go back – it goes straight into consolidated revenue then.

Anthony CARBINES: It continues to be harness racing land that as a statutory authority it oversees, and the government continues to support Harness Racing Victoria. I want to thank the board for making sure that they are in a financially sustainable position, and I can assure them that the government will continue to financially support Harness Racing Victoria into the future. There is no clearer demonstration.

Jade BENHAM: Can you guarantee that?

Anthony CARBINES: Absolutely. You can guarantee that, and it is right there in the multimillions of dollars provided by the government that will continue to support HRV and our harness racing clubs across the state to make sure that we rightsize them. Let us remember that several years ago Harness Racing Victoria could not pay its wages. It was broke. And this was the work –

Jade BENHAM: Yes, we get this, but this is a very simple solution, Minister. The industry is just looking for a guarantee from you, because you know – and you have been made aware of this predicament many times – that the industry is unlikely to survive without this solution. Can you give them an unequivocal guarantee on this lifeline?

Anthony CARBINES: Discussions continue with the government and HRV on how we can further support them with regard to any sale of Melton land, but any determination to do that needs to benefit the ongoing

future of Harness Racing Victoria and also ensure that the taxpayers of Victoria, who have allocated \$86 million to Harness Racing Victoria, have been supported.

Jade BENHAM: But you cannot give them a guarantee if you are not going to commit the funds from the sale of that land. That is a guaranteed very simple solution. We do not need to cloud it up with uncertainties. If you are going to guarantee the future of the industry, can you guarantee the balance of that land then goes back to HRV?

Anthony CARBINES: There is no double-dipping here. \$86.5 million has been provided to Harness Racing Victoria by the taxpayer.

Jade BENHAM: Yes, we know that. We understand that.

Anthony CARBINES: And the taxpayer is entitled to have those funds returned to them in due course.

Jade BENHAM: And they will, after the sale of this land, Minister. We know that after the sale of this land, there will be a balance that we do not want to go to consolidated revenue. We want it to go back to HRV to guarantee the future of the industry. Can you guarantee that? Can you give them assurity?

Anthony CARBINES: The assurance and guarantee that I give to Harness Racing Victoria is the one that they have always had from our government, and it is demonstrated by an \$86 million commitment to make sure that they can turn around their finances, save 4500 jobs –

Jade BENHAM: But they still do not know if the future is secure. Without this guarantee they cannot ensure the survival of the industry.

Anthony CARBINES: I do not accept that logic. They are subject to the government's landholding policy.

Jade BENHAM: That is the logic coming from Harness Racing Victoria.

Anthony CARBINES: I speak very regularly with Harness Racing Victoria. I commend them on the work that they have done, working with the government to ensure that Harness Racing Victoria has a sustainable future.

Jade BENHAM: Then grant them what they are asking for.

Anthony CARBINES: And we are making sure to do – when they could not pay their wages, to keep the lights on – is provide some \$86 million for the transition that has been needed to bring them into the 21st century and secure their future.

Jade BENHAM: And they are very grateful for that.

Anthony CARBINES: That is good.

Jade BENHAM: We know that. That will be repaid with the sale of that land at Melton Park. They are just waiting for the guarantee. The balance of that land then will not go back into consolidated revenue to go into big holes under the city. It goes into ensuring the future of harness racing in this state.

Anthony CARBINES: Harness racing in our state is secure under our government because it has had multimillion dollars of investment.

Jade BENHAM: But you cannot guarantee it.

Michael GALEA: He already has.

Anthony CARBINES: It will continue to have an investment from our government, and I am looking forward to working with them on securing their future.

Jade BENHAM: No, you cannot guarantee it if you are not going to commit to this move that the industry called for. That is not a guarantee.

The CHAIR: The next 11 minutes are going to Mr Tak.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you, Chair, Minister, officials. Minister, I refer to the ‘Department Performance Statement’ on pages 97 and 116. In relation to ‘Racing industry support and regulation’, could you please explain the reference to the development of racing, training and community infrastructure and how the Victorian Racing Industry Fund supports those objectives?

Anthony CARBINES: Thank you very much for that question, Mr Tak. In relation to the output ‘Racing industry support and regulation’, what I would say is that there are two funding programs that I referred to in my presentation to the committee, the Victorian Racing Industry Fund and the Major Racing Events Fund, which concludes at the end of the financial year. VRIF is a longstanding program that provides some \$72 million over four years to racing clubs and controlling bodies to improve racing and training infrastructure, with a focus on participant safety and animal welfare, and also to promote event attendance in regional Victoria, improve customer and community facilities and promote the Victorian breeding and sales industries. The government committed to extending the VRIF at the 2022 election and secured funding in the 2023–24 budget to support the program until the end of the 2026–27 financial year.

The program has been extremely successful over many years, especially for our rural and regional racing clubs across all three codes, and I know the Member for Mildura is well aware of the support that has been provided in her electorate – nearly \$750,000 in grant funding to support 25 projects worth some \$1.5 million. I would not want to forget the Member for Polwarth either, where the VRIF has provided some \$250,000 to support 14 programs worth nearly half a million dollars. In fact as of 30 April 2026 the VRIF had provided more than \$60 million to co-fund 620 projects in this term of government and nearly \$14 million to support 180 projects in this financial year to date. Just over 40 per cent of the funding provided under the current iteration of the VRIF has been allocated to racing and training infrastructure projects. This enables racing clubs in Victoria to focus on running amazing events and maintaining their facilities with the confidence that the government and the wider industry is there to support them when it comes to larger infrastructure projects. Examples include the \$2.34 million that VRIF provided to upgrade the synthetic track at Ballarat Turf Club, ensuring that one of our most important racing and training venues continues to have the best and safest facilities possible. We have also supported the Bendigo Harness Racing Club, with over \$2 million for lighting upgrades and the construction of a roof over the stabling areas; and the Sale Turf Club, with a \$220,000 upgrade of the stabling area.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you. My supplementary question is also to your presentation. Minister, how does the Victorian Racing Industry Fund help racing clubs to support their local community, in particular in regional Victoria?

Anthony CARBINES: Thanks, Member for Clarinda. I touched on the economic and employment contribution that the racing industry makes, and nowhere is that contribution more important than in rural and regional Victoria. In addition to the \$1.17 billion and 9000 jobs that the racing industry contributes to regional Victoria, more than 650 community and not-for-profit organisations share racing club facilities and over 1200 charitable organisations are supported by the racing industry. That is why as a government we are committed to ensuring that the VRIF delivers for the regions. I have spoken in this committee previously about the regional customer facilities program, which I established as minister in 2023. The program provides grants of up to \$100,000 to support country racing clubs with infrastructure upgrades and initiatives that support the customer experience on race days. By way of an update, the program has now provided some \$5 million in grants that improve country racecourses not just for race days but for other community events all year round.

VRIF also includes support for regional racing events. The program is in addition to our Major Racing Events Fund, which has a more metropolitan focus but has provided support for larger regional events, including in Geelong, Cranbourne and Pakenham. The regional racing events fund provides grants of up to \$20,000 to help country racing clubs ensure the best possible race day events in their local communities. This funding supports temporary infrastructure, live entertainment and kids activities, all the things that have grown to be part and parcel of a day at the country races. VRIF have supported over 350 regional events with nearly \$4 million in funding since 2023.

One of the highlights of the VRIF program for me over the past 12 months was being able to sign off on a larger grant of almost \$50,000 to support an initiative of Racing Victoria to support bushfire-affected communities and emergency service volunteers and staff by raising funds across four regional race meetings.

That funding supported around 200 volunteers and emergency services workers with free entry and hospitality at the Seymour Racing Club's meeting on 20 February in addition to the events at Towong, Alexandra and Kyneton. Racing Victoria raised some \$200,000 at the Seymour meeting – I was pleased to attend – for first responders and charities supporting Victoria's bushfire recovery efforts. I want to congratulate Racing Victoria, Country Racing Victoria and Seymour Racing Club as well as other clubs involved in what was a very worthwhile initiative.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you. The fund also supports racing controlling bodies to ensure the highest standards of animal welfare are maintained throughout the Victorian racing industry. Would you like to talk more about that, please?

Anthony CARBINES: Thanks, Mr Tak. The VRIF program has always had a strong focus on animal welfare. It is one of the primary drivers of decisions around grant allocation. Most racing infrastructure is of course safety related in some way, whether it is making sure that barrier stalls are regularly replaced or ensuring that track surfaces are performing at their best. All of these projects help ensure that the racing industry is providing the safest possible working environment for horses, greyhounds and of course human participants.

Late last year I approved \$3 million from VRIF for a \$5 million upgrade at Greyhound Racing Victoria's Greyhound Adoption Program facility in Seymour. The redevelopment will deliver modernised and expanded facilities, including upgraded veterinary operations, new exercise yards, an administrative centre and additional kennels to boost capacity. Since 1996 GAP has been Australia's largest greyhound rehoming agency, helping retired racing greyhounds transition from the track to loving homes. The Seymour site has served as the program's main hub since 2003, supported by a smaller centre at Tullamarine. Once complete, the upgraded facility will enable an additional 55 greyhounds to be adopted in its first year alone, meaning even more dogs will find their forever homes. The investment builds on previous improvements at Seymour, including new day yards that provide ample space for greyhounds to play and exercise. Our government will always prioritise animal welfare in the Victorian racing industry, and the VRIF is an important part of that commitment.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you, Minister. Moving on, I refer to your presentation and also to the 'Department Performance Statement', page 97 and 116. Minister, you outlined the substantial economic contributions of the racing industry to our economy. How is the government supporting the industry to continue to grow its economic contributions?

Anthony CARBINES: Thank you, Member for Clarinda. We provide support through VRIF, but there are certainly additional supports that we provide to support the ongoing development of the Victorian racing industry, or VRI, as we refer to it. Ensuring the industry continues to derive critical revenue from wagering on its product was one of the biggest challenges facing the government when I became the minister in 2022. In 2024 the government awarded a new wagering and betting licence and simultaneously concluded new arrangements with the VRI to ensure funding certainty over the next decade. These arrangements reflect the very different way the wagering sector operates in an online environment. The racing industry understands it must continue to adapt and evolve. We are committed to working with the industry to ensure that happens.

I have also referenced the Major Racing Events Fund of course, which has provided \$15 million over three years to support our biggest racing events and the flow-on effects from those events for the visitor economy and indeed the wider economy in Victoria. So as the Minister, I am absolutely committed to ensuring racing remains an important contributor to our state.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you very much. How does the Major Racing Events Fund help support the Victorian economy in this context?

Anthony CARBINES: Thank you. The Major Racing Events Fund provides \$15 million over three years for racing clubs and controlling bodies to develop or secure significant, new or expanded racing events. In terms of how the fund contributes to the economy and the development of the industry, I should point out again that the Melbourne Cup Carnival remains a jewel in the crown of Victoria's sporting and major events calendar. It is quite an achievement when you consider our status as the sport and major events capital of Australia, with the Australian Formula One Grand Prix, the Australian Open and of course the AFL Grand Final. In 2025 the MREF provided \$1.8 million to support the Melbourne Cup Carnival, with significant live entertainment headlined by DJ Fisher, as well as temporary infrastructure to help the Victoria Racing Club develop a

compelling offering across multiple segments of the market. The 2025 Melbourne Cup Carnival generated a gross economic benefit of more than \$530 million to Victoria, the highest economic impact on record, an increase of 6 per cent year on year.

The impact of Victoria's visitor economy is very significant, with over 70,000 visitors to Victoria from interstate and overseas specifically for the event, the highest since 2017. Attendance by people aged 18 to 29 has also risen by 50 per cent since 2019, and in 2025 was the highest recorded since 2015. MREF funding helps to support initiatives specifically targeted at younger and more diverse audiences. It is encouraging to see that investment paying off. The VRC has been able to create some great momentum over the past couple of years as we have come out of the COVID period. I am sure they would say that our support through MREF has really been instrumental in that success. The fund has provided \$1.25 million for the Caulfield Cup Carnival as well.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you, Minister.

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

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon, Minister and officials. In relation to the racing industry support and regulation output, can I ask what is the FTE of the Greyhound Adoption Program?

Anthony CARBINES: I probably do not have that specifically, but I am happy to get some clarity on the Greyhound Adoption Program staff.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Yes, the FTE. Just on notice is fine if that is what you need to do.

Anthony CARBINES: Yes, we can talk with GRV in relation to that.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Can I also ask for the FTE of Greyhound Clubs Victoria's officers as the representative body of greyhound racing clubs in Victoria?

Anthony CARBINES: I think some of that would be in their annual report. But we can –

Aiv PUGLIELLI: I believe it is not, from my searches. But yes, if you can come back to us, that would be good.

Anthony CARBINES: We can clarify what is available.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Just moving on, in terms of rehoming, specifically looking at the Racing 2 Rehome GRV export rehoming program, how many Victorian greyhounds have been sent to North America through that program in 2024–25?

Anthony CARBINES: I would not have any details with regard to those programs. I am familiar with most things –

Aiv PUGLIELLI: You do not have oversight of those programs?

Anthony CARBINES: Well, no, because Greyhound Racing Victoria regulates racing in Victoria and has the primary focus of maintaining their safety and their welfare. But the Greyhound Adoption Program is particularly where the government's focus is.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. Just to check, you do not have visibility for that Racing 2 Rehome program, about any dogs that might have been injured or died during transit?

Anthony CARBINES: My focus is the program that GRV run in relation to the Greyhound Adoption Program that is based at Seymour and also a smaller satellite operation that we have at Tullamarine.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. Thank you. On to greyhound racing trials, can I ask how many greyhounds have been injured in or died at or after trials, including official and unofficial trials?

Anthony CARBINES: In particular, if you are talking about racing fatalities in regard to greyhounds, racing fatalities sit in the 2024–25 year at 43, which is a 57 per cent reduction since 2015–16. And our continued

improvement in racing welfare for greyhounds is a demonstration of the investments that we have made that have seen a 57 per cent reduction over the past decade in racing fatalities.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Are you able to disaggregate in any way those fatalities, for example, between unofficial and official trials?

Anthony CARBINES: I am happy to take advice on those things, but overall the statistics that are published by Greyhound Racing Victoria in their annual reports demonstrate that we have made significant improvements about racing fatalities, and that is significant 57 per cent reduction over the past decade.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Great. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Minister and officials, 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 short break before beginning its consideration of the portfolio for community safety at 4:10 pm. I declare this hearing adjourned.

Witnesses withdrew.