

# **PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE**

## **Inquiry into the 2025-26 Budget Estimates**

Melbourne – Thursday 5 June 2025

### **MEMBERS**

Sarah Connolly – Chair

Nicholas McGowan – Deputy Chair

Jade Benham

Michael Galea

Mathew Hilakari

Lauren Kathage

Aiv Puglielli

Meng Heang Tak

Richard Welch

## WITNESSES

Natalie Hutchins MP, Minister for Women; and

Peta McCammon, Secretary, and

Kate Berry, Executive Director, Equality, Seniors, Women and Equity Strategy, Department of Families, Fairness and Housing.

**The CHAIR:** I declare open this hearing of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee.

I ask that mobile telephones please be turned to silent.

On behalf of the Parliament the committee is conducting this Inquiry into the 2025–26 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 you say can be picked up and captioned, even if you say it quietly.

As Chair I expect that committee members will be respectful towards witnesses, the Victorian community joining the hearing via the live stream 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 Women the Honourable Natalie Hutchins as well as officials from DFFH. Minister, I invite you to make an opening statement or presentation of no more than 5 minutes, after which time committee members will ask you questions. Your time starts now.

**Natalie HUTCHINS:** Thank you, Chair, and thanks to the committee for the opportunity to present on the women's portfolio and the investments in this year's budget. Can I begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land that we are meeting on and pay my respects to their elders, past and present.

### Visual presentation.

**Natalie HUTCHINS:** Victoria leads the nation with ambitious gender equality plans through the work of the women's portfolio. This work is guided by the *Gender Equality Act 2020* and our four-year gender equality strategy called *Our Equal State*. The portfolio delivers policy and programs to improve women's leadership, economic participation, health, wellbeing and safety. The 2025–26 budget invests \$1 million over two years in the women's portfolio to continue celebrating women's achievements and leadership through the Victorian Honour Roll of Women.

I am proud of our achievements over the past year and will share a small snapshot with you today. In August 2024 we marked one year of our gender equality strategy called *Our Equal State*. The strategy contains 110 actions and is led across 37 government portfolios, embedding a shared responsibility for gender equality across the whole of government. The 2025–26 budget invests a total of \$4.4 billion, as outlined in the 'Gender Equality Budget Statement', to support women and girls, including with access to the prescriptions they need and the training for the jobs of tomorrow they need. Whole-of-government investments currently underway as part of the strategy include three-year-old kinder, which is supporting families to save money and, most importantly, supporting women to return to the paid workforce. As part of the women's health and wellbeing program, we have launched the first five of 20 women's health clinics that provide access to comprehensive care and consulted on the inquiry into women's pain. We have reformed legislation to secure gender-responsive budgeting into the future and launched our women-in-manufacturing strategy, coupled with supporting grants. The public sector gender equality commissioner has released insights from the 2023 workplace audits

conducted over 300 defined entities under the *Gender Equality Act*, which are all about making workplaces fairer for women.

We began our nation-leading free pads and tampons program. We know that pads and tampons are not a luxury; they are a necessity. We have installed 185 machines so far, and everyone who needs these products should have access to them wherever and whenever they need them. Those 185 machines have so far dispensed 38,000 packets of products. Victoria is leading the way as the first state of its kind to implement this type of program. It builds on our work in providing free pads and tampons in government schools. This program will improve access, deliver cost-of-living relief and tackle the stigma around periods. In the year ahead we will continue delivering free pads and tampons in public places. We are building six new artworks throughout Victoria's public art program, continuing to elevate and celebrate significant contributions of Victorian women in history. Throughout our safe workplaces initiative we will work with workers and employers to make sure women are safe at work. The working women's centre is supported to make workplaces safer. Preparations are underway to welcome more than 6500 gender equality advocates and leaders and decision-makers from around the world as Victoria hosts the Women Deliver conference in 2026. And we will close the gender gaps that exist in the public service, working with the commissioner, who will support workplaces to meet their obligations under the Act. We are very proud of how far we have come. Real changes will take systemic action from all corners of our society, including all levels of government. We will continue to make the bold and progressive decisions needed to improve the outcomes for women here in Victoria.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Minister. We are going to go to Ms Benham.

**Jade BENHAM:** Thank you, Chair. Morning, Minister.

**Natalie HUTCHINS:** Morning.

**Jade BENHAM:** With regard to the 'Gender Equality Budget Statement' and the safe workplaces for women, how much has been allocated in this year's budget for that initiative?

**Natalie HUTCHINS:** I was proud to announce \$5.5 million in March this year that was from previous budgets. That program has only just been launched in conjunction with our partners across the state, including VCCI, Trades Hall and a coalition of legal centres who are providing a working women's centre service, predominantly funded through the Commonwealth, but it will be extended into rural and regional areas through our support. That funding only got released and announced this year. We will be looking forward to how we continue to support the work as it rolls out into the future.

**Jade BENHAM:** In what month did you say that that had started?

**Natalie HUTCHINS:** March.

**Jade BENHAM:** In March, okay. Have you got any KPIs or measurement metrics to understand its effectiveness? How is that going to be measured?

**Natalie HUTCHINS:** There will be a review and an assessment done on the program.

**Jade BENHAM:** Internal review?

**Natalie HUTCHINS:** No. Actual organisations as part of their contract for the work will have to have to have an independent review undertaken. I might ask Kate to supplement on that.

**Kate BERRY:** Absolutely. Thank you for the question, Ms Benham. As part of this process all of our funded providers will be required to assess their impact and have very strong KPIs and metrics as part of the contract going forward. In the case of Trades Hall and VCCI we will be doing yearly reviews and considering additional funding or ongoing funding beyond two years once we have a look at those outcomes, in accordance with the KPIs.

**Jade BENHAM:** Thank you. So further funding is based on outcomes?

**Kate BERRY:** Absolutely.

**Jade BENHAM:** Great. Thank you. In March this year there was that horrific report in the *Age* about shocking examples of mistreatment of women and violence against women on government building sites, and I think we all know the stories about one being bashed and locked in a small room. Given those three projects were government-funded projects, I am interested to know if there has been support or, Minister, if you have spoken to the women who spoke up and complained. Has there been any support or outreach? Have there been any measures to make sure the perpetrators have been dismissed and no longer permitted on government worksites, and what is being done to prevent this in the future?

**Natalie HUTCHINS:** I thank the member for her question. I think this is probably more a WorkSafe investigation than a women's portfolio type investigation.

**Jade BENHAM:** It does not come under safer workplaces for women?

**Natalie HUTCHINS:** Our program is a proactive one that is about educating in the workplace to prevent this from happening, educating employers to make sure that this sort of behaviour is nipped in the bud and stopped before it happens. In terms of an ongoing investigation into what happened to those women, that is something that would be done by WorkSafe. And I agree with you, it was disgusting behaviour. I cannot comment about what investigations are happening there, but what I can tell you is that I am proud that this government is putting in place a program where we are trying to stop this sort of behaviour happening across a number of industries, to set a new benchmark to say that this is not acceptable.

**Jade BENHAM:** With regard to that and moving forward with this program, are we able to get a list of what the detailed KPIs are that you are measuring against?

**Natalie HUTCHINS:** There is an agreement that is in place with these organisations. When you say KPIs, I say outcomes.

**Jade BENHAM:** Yes.

**Natalie HUTCHINS:** So, yes.

**Jade BENHAM:** When we say that there is the continued funding and there are specific metrics to see how effective the program is, can we get details on that provided to us?

**Natalie HUTCHINS:** I will be making all of the results of any assessment that happens on a program like this public anyway.

**Jade BENHAM:** Before those reports come out, can we see what exactly the measurements are?

**Natalie HUTCHINS:** Well, I am sure you can.

**Jade BENHAM:** I am guessing the department knows exactly what they are.

**Natalie HUTCHINS:** Yes.

**Kate BERRY:** Yes, absolutely. It has been a very careful consideration of a range of metrics here. We have got direct legal support for women through the consortia, and that will be in response to raising awareness as part of the other programs.

**Jade BENHAM:** Yes, I am happy to take that. If we can just get the KPIs supplied on notice, that would be great.

**Natalie HUTCHINS:** I do not think we refer to them as KPIs, is my point. We talk about outcomes. We want X amount of people delivered training, we want X amount of worksites to be addressed, we want a range of sectors to be covered. Those are the outcomes we are looking for.

**Jade BENHAM:** But it has been spoken about in terms of KPIs. Even earlier we have mentioned KPIs. So there are specific KPIs. If I can get what they are on notice, that would be great.

**Natalie HUTCHINS:** We can give you what expected outcomes are from it. We do not refer to them as KPIs.

**Jade BENHAM:** Okay. Can I get those on notice, please?

**Natalie HUTCHINS:** Yes.

**Jade BENHAM:** Great. Thank you. When we talk about ‘Our equal state’ – and this is budget paper 3, page 128 – the government’s gender equality strategy and action plan, is additional funding required for the rollout of this strategy, and if so, how much are we looking at?

**Natalie HUTCHINS:** Because the strategy goes across every single portfolio, we have worked with every minister in putting this plan together to ensure that policies within each department are delivering towards that. So our commitments to the pain inquiry, our commitments to standing up new facilities for women’s health, they are all line items that meet the outcomes here – the Safer Workplaces program. They are all line items. Does the actual action plan have its own line item? No, it does not, other than the fact that we have a consultative committee of around about 10 people, who we work with to ensure that we are on track in implementing the plan. That would be the only kind of dollar support that comes with the plan’s ongoing implementation. But certainly the role of the department in working across all departments to see how it is tracking is a big part of that.

**Jade BENHAM:** Thank you.

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

**Meng Heang TAK:** Thank you, Chair. Good morning, Minister and officials. I am interested in the assistance supporting women with cost of living, specifically free pads and tampons. Minister, I refer to page 46 of the ‘Department Performance Statement’ and also to your presentation, which covers machines installed as part of the free pads and tampons program. Could you please talk about what exactly you are delivering as part of this program.

**Natalie HUTCHINS:** Thank you. The commitment that was made in terms of this program has been broken down into a couple of stages now in terms of its rollout, but certainly the initial commitment was to make sure that every LGA in the state had access to machines and products across a number of partners that we are working with. Some of those are train stations, some of those are libraries and some of those are aquatic centres. Others are big landmarks here in Victoria, like our State Library, and big sporting facilities as well, where we know that there are a lot of women gathering to be part of that. We continue to negotiate those agreements to roll out across 700 locations in total. Many of the venues will be receiving more than one machine, so we are looking at up to 1500 machines going into those places, including some hospitals and the public access points of some hospitals – because we know this is an issue for visitors that go to hospitals – courts, TAFE and, as I said, major cultural institutions.

The machines have been designed to be accessible for all abilities, very easy, lots of pictures so that if you do not speak English, you can still navigate the use of the machine just through the pictures. This is something that we hear is really assisting in the cost of living – that unfortunately the cost of period products is a real drag on many women’s wallets and that this is assisting in that. We have heard, unfortunately, of many cases of women who have not travelled or gone to work or gone to education facilities because they have had their period at the time and had no access to products. We know in wealthy countries like Australia this is something we should be providing our women to open up access to that freedom but to also break down the stigma that exists. There are some fantastic organisations that have already done work in this space, like Share the Dignity, who have really focused in their work with those women who are most vulnerable. What we are saying is that we want to make sure that all women have access to these products when and where they need them.

**Meng Heang TAK:** Thank you, Minister. I was pleased to accompany you and also the former mayor of the City of Kingston to actually see the machine being installed in my electorate at the Clarinda Library at the time. Minister, could you talk a bit more about the other locations where women can access free pads and tampons?

**Natalie HUTCHINS:** Yes, sure. Thank you. Basically we are looking at having at least four machines available in each of the LGAs as a minimum and making sure that we are consulting with councils about the best locations and the high-use locations where we know there is absolute need there. As you mentioned, Clarinda Library is one of those. Westall Library is another one. Dingley library is another one.

We are not only putting machines into libraries, but also we have recently announced a partnership with 18 shopping centres as well, including Chadstone, because we know that is another point at which women have a need to be able to access. New machines are being installed literally every day. So I urge members of the committee to find the most up-to-date list. We have an interactive map, so you can go onto the pads and tampons website and see actually where the live machines are operating are now, and as I said, that is being updated daily.

Feedback from the community is really, really heartening. As we launch more and more, we are hearing from local community leaders, particularly from librarians and teachers, examples of students who that were not coming to class or were missing a number of days every month; they now know that lack of access to pads and tampons was hindering their attendance at school or their ability to come and study at the library. I remember many, many years ago as Minister for Local Government having librarians tell me that the number one thing they got asked by young women was not for a particular book, but ‘Do you have a pad or a tampon so that I can stay here, not have to leave, and can continue to study?’ To be fair, is it the role of a librarian to be supplying that out of their own handbag? No, it is not. Launching this program in the regions has been a real eye-opener to what the needs of regional areas are, particularly having launched this in Gippsland at Warragul TAFE and hearing stories directly from the campus manager there around how much this will improve student support on campus as well.

**Meng Heang TAK:** Thank you, Minister. I am also interested in the honour roll for women, having a very good friend of mine who was a recipient of this celebration back in the early days, 2001. Minister, it is referred to in budget paper 3, page 38. Can you please tell us about what the honour roll’s funding is for and how it benefits women in other states?

**Natalie HUTCHINS:** Thank you. Yes, this year we have allocated \$500,000 to continue the honour roll here in Victoria. Really notably, it is worth knowing that next year it will be the 25th anniversary of the honour roll that was started by the late Joan Kirner. It was launched as part of centenary of Federation Women Shaping the Nation project that Joan actually chaired. The honour roll acknowledges the outstanding achievements of Victorian women. There have been 730 women acknowledged and put on the honour roll. It is about having an acknowledgement of the significant work and achievements by Victorian women, which quite often go unrecorded and uncelebrated. Those inductees are from all walks of life, and they have some pretty inspirational stories – really outstanding leaders that deserve to have their contributions recognised. Any Victorian woman can be nominated, and any woman can also self-nominate. Anyone can nominate a woman – including a man. It has an independent panel. I do not make the shortlist up. I do not know that I even could because there are so many applicants. There are 200 this year and they are all amazing.

There is an independent committee of women that makes the decision around the finalists each year. This year is one of the highest numbers that we have received. Last year’s honour roll included inducting people like Professor Jane Gunn, who was honoured for her transformative impact on women’s health alongside Professor Kudzai Kanhutu, who established a first-of-its kind telehealth service here in Victoria, breaking down barriers for rural and culturally linguistic Victorians. We also honoured Libbi Gorr, trailblazer in the arts and the media, for her work across journalism, teaching and live performance. Community heroes have been recognised for championing their local communities. Last year we inducted a woman called Lyndie Freestone, who is a renowned woman from Geelong who has worked with high-risk and homeless young people for over 25 years in that region and has made a huge impact on the local community. So as you can see, it is a really important program.

**Meng Heang TAK:** And also an exciting program, Minister. With the remaining time, I am interested to hear just a little bit about the Women Deliver conference that is coming to Melbourne soon. Could you please tell us a bit more about what Women Deliver is about and why is it important for our state?

**Natalie HUTCHINS:** Women Deliver is a big win for the women’s sector here in Victoria and Australia and the visitor economy as well.

**The CHAIR:** Apologies, Minister and Mr Tak. I am going to go to Mr Puglielli.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you, Chair. Good morning. I have just been looking at budget paper 3, page 124, the department output summary. Minister, can I ask: of the programs which fall under your portfolio, what

programs are specifically targeted to women in multicultural communities? And could you tell me what the total funding allocation to these programs is as budget output?

**Natalie HUTCHINS:** I do have budget outcomes but not broken down into multicultural, but that is something we could provide, because there is the women of colour program. There are a number of programs that we do provide. I probably do not have them neatly in order. But Peta, do you want to –

**Peta McCAMMON:** Yes. We are happy to see what we can provide. As the minister says, we might have some specific line items, but also there are a number of other commitments in the strategy that would cover multicultural communities. We are happy to take that on notice and see what we can provide.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you. That is much appreciated. Can I then ask: what, Minister, is the total funding allocation to all of your programs under this portfolio?

**Natalie HUTCHINS:** \$15.9 million this year.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Okay. Thank you. And then of those programs, in your assessment, Minister, which do you think are going to have the most significant engagement with women in multicultural communities?

**Natalie HUTCHINS:** I think probably number one will be the continuation of the rollout of free pads and tampons and making sure that the application and the way that we have done it, as I said, cuts through language barriers. I have seen women who cannot read or speak English be able to use these machines just because of the simple design that we have utilised. I think that that is definitely a game changer. I think the ongoing work we are doing with the safer workplaces, particularly with the resourcing of Trades Hall's program and the women's legal centres, is going to make a real difference to women being able to report workplace harassment and potentially see change there. And hopefully the gender pay gap is something that we see big changes in, which we are seeing across the public service, but we want to see that in the private sector.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Minister and officials, thank you very much for taking the time to appear before the committee this morning. 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 Treaty and First Peoples portfolio at 9:40 am. I declare this hearing adjourned.

**Witnesses withdrew.**