

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 Suleyman MP, Minister for Youth; and

Peta McCammon, Secretary,

Argiri Alisandratos, Deputy Secretary, Disability, Fairness and Emergency Management, and

Gerry Goswell, Executive Director, Community Inclusion, Veterans and Youth, 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 of this hearing may not be protected by this privilege.

All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard, and it is being live broadcast on the Parliament's website. The broadcast includes automated captioning. Members and witnesses should be aware that all microphones are live during the hearings and anything you say may be picked up and captioned, even if you say it very 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 Youth the Honourable Natalie Suleyman as well as officials from DFFH. Minister, I am going to invite you to make an opening statement or presentation of no more than 5 minutes, after which time committee members will ask you some questions. Your time starts now.

Natalie SULEYMAN: Thank you, Chair and committee members for the opportunity to present on our work in the youth portfolio, including our government's investments in the 2025–26 state budget. Before I begin, I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land we are meeting on here today and pay my respects to their elders both past and present.

Visual presentation.

Natalie SULEYMAN: Young people are the next generation of this state. They are our future. That is why we are working hard to support them to reach their full potential, because no matter where you live or what your background is, we want to make sure that every single young Victorian is safe, valued and supported. It has been a very big 12 months, and we have done a lot. With Victoria's youth strategy, Our Promise, Your Future, our government is delivering on the most ambitious agenda for young people in the nation. In September I launched the YouthNav online platform, a key part of the strategy. The platform was designed with young people for young people and provides practical guidance for young people on topics like financial literacy, getting your first job, health and wellbeing and so much more. Over the past 12 months we have reshaped our three largest grant programs, building on our track record of delivering what young people need where they need it. This includes support for our nationwide programs Engage! and FReeZA, which we have rebranded as Amplify to launch into the new era of live music and entertainment events led by young Victorians. And we have launched Future Ready, where students will gain practical experience and support, including through career advice, mentoring, work placements, volunteering and accredited training courses while at school.

It does not stop there though. We have continued to back the quality youth infrastructure that communities deserve. I was thrilled to attend the opening of the new youth hub in Geelong in January this year and the upgraded youth hub in Nillumbik last year. And we have delivered a further three Scout hall projects so far in the last financial year through our strong partnership with Scouts Victoria. This means our government has delivered a total of 26 new and upgraded Scout halls since 2018.

We have also invested in support for First Nations young people to back their goals and aspirations, including through our partnership with the Koorie Youth Council. And we have delivered a range of targeted programs to provide the support that young people need when they need it most, including our successful community support groups, or our CSGs, Le Mana Pasifika project and the Living Learning program. This year's state budget makes a significant investment of \$20 million over two years in programs that are reaching young people who need that extra support with their mental health, education, employment and wellbeing. Our CSGs will continue to provide individual support each year to more than 2500 South Sudanese, Somali and Afghan young people and their families, and the Le Mana Pasifika project will continue to support more than 1000 Pasifika young people and their families, including in critical areas of education and mental health. This investment will also fund other wraparound supports for multicultural young people through our partnerships with the Youth Support and Advocacy Service. These initiatives help young people by providing important sport, recreation and cultural education activities in a safe, family-centred and community-led model.

The Regional Presence project, delivered by the Centre for Multicultural Youth and Youth Affairs Council Victoria, supporting regional young people, also will continue its important work, backing rural and regional young Victorians around the state. We are also investing in more local youth infrastructure projects, building on our partnerships with Scouts Victoria and of course our local councils. Finally, the 2025–26 state budget is investing \$7.5 million over two years to continue the Living Learning program with Melbourne City Mission. It is successfully re-engaging young people with mental health challenges to get them back on track. There is so much more we have achieved through our community partnerships with young people, and over the next 12 months we will continue to deliver on the commitments to Victorian young people right across the state. Thank you.

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

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

Natalie SULEYMAN: Good morning, Ms Benham.

Jade BENHAM: Budget paper 3, page 38, we are talking about FReeZA – Amplify – YACVic and Scouts. What is the funding breakdown for those programs, and how does it compare to last year?

Natalie SULEYMAN: So we are referring to budget paper 3, page 38. Sorry, just one moment.

Jade BENHAM: Output initiatives. The Investing early and the Living – you can either refer to that one or page 124 I think is the other one, output summaries. Just really chasing a breakdown on those different programs.

Natalie SULEYMAN: Sure. Just for your information, Ms Benham, FReeZA and Engage! are not funded through that specific line item. I can talk about 'Investing early in young Victorians'. As I have indicated, we will see in this budget the largest investment ever made – that is, close to \$30.9 million – to continue backing our young people. Many would know our youth strategy, backed by the investment of over – you know, we have seen \$600 million focusing on young people through the YouthNav. That was something, again, very integral. We launched that last year, and of course this year we have seen programs – just recently we have launched a number of programs that assist young people. I am really proud of Future Ready, a program that has delivered more opportunities for government secondary colleges. This has been really important, and it has opened the criteria. Opening it up to not-for-profit organisations as well has really been complementary to the programs that we have delivered such as, Engage!, Amplify and a number of other programs.

Jade BENHAM: Sorry, in the interest of – I have only got really limited time. If we go to budget paper 3, page 124, with the line item there for 'Youth', we want specific amounts individually for the different programs – FReeZA, or Amplify; YACVic in particular – I have worked with YACVic before, they are an amazing organisation; and Scouts – and how they compare to last year.

Natalie SULEYMAN: Sure. I will just pass on to the department to give you that breakdown. Thank you.

Gerry GOSWELL: Thank you. Thanks, Ms Benham, for your question. As the minister indicated, a number of the programs that you have referred to are funded through the portfolio's base budget, so they are not reflected in the specific budget line items that were referenced in the page you provided. If you are interested, perhaps I will start with Scouts, if that is helpful.

Jade BENHAM: Yes. I just need how much their funding allocation is for each of those programs.

Gerry GOSWELL: Scouts and Girl Guides were funded through the 2023–24 state budget for their programs at \$0.5 million, so \$500,000, per year for Scouts and Girl Guides programs.

Jade BENHAM: Each?

Gerry GOSWELL: That is the total together.

Jade BENHAM: Total.

Gerry GOSWELL: Correct.

Jade BENHAM: Half a million for Scouts and –

Gerry GOSWELL: And Girl Guides at the programs level, that is right. In addition to that, Ms Benham, Scouts has also received funding through the 2023–24 budget for specific infrastructure projects, for six projects for Scout halls.

Jade BENHAM: And how long does that go?

Gerry GOSWELL: That funding was over two years. That was \$942,000 over two years. All that has been paid out to Scouts except for around \$313,000, and that is just linked to the delivery of that project cycle, and we work really closely with Scouts Victoria to ensure that the payments match the delivery of those infrastructure projects.

Jade BENHAM: So they have not had any additional funding this year?

Gerry GOSWELL: They actually have. Minister, you might want to talk about their Scouts funding that is provided in this year's budget. I might hand back to the minister. They have received additional funding for Scout hall projects this year.

Natalie SULEYMAN: Yes. Thank you for that, Gerry. What we have seen this year is a commitment of \$20 million over two years to support young people. And I have outlined, again, the package of delivery, and that includes the six community support groups. Of course our many programs, including our partnership with Scouts Victoria, across Victoria –

Jade BENHAM: Just the Scouts. Sorry, we are really tight for time.

Natalie SULEYMAN: Yes. And we have increased that youth participation, and importantly it has been a great partnership. As I have indicated, that is through that \$12 million.

Jade BENHAM: \$12 million for Scout halls?

Natalie SULEYMAN: No. Sorry, it is \$20 million overall for two years for the youth portfolio.

Jade BENHAM: Yes. I am just chasing the Scouts number.

Natalie SULEYMAN: And the community infrastructure projects – let me just go through to my –

Jade BENHAM: I am really chasing individual breakdowns for this budget.

Natalie SULEYMAN: Yes. Thank you. What we will see in this year's state budget is \$820,000 additionally, again, to funds for Scout halls, and that includes a community centre infrastructure project as well. So overall you will see \$820,000 additional funding in this year's budget.

Jade BENHAM: Can we get those other figures provided on notice?

Gerry GOSWELL: I can also speak to the other figures now, Ms Benham.

Jade BENHAM: I have got a few other questions, and like I said, I have only got really limited time. I really want to get on to –

The CHAIR: Excuse me, Ms Benham, you can ask the question. If they have the figures, we will hear them here as evidence.

Jade BENHAM: Okay. Can I ask about YouthNav? It was brought up in the original presentation. Last year with the rollout of YouthNav, how much does it cost, and who is the targeted group?

Natalie SULEYMAN: Is there a particular line item in the budget?

Jade BENHAM: There is one line item on budget paper 3, page 124, under 'Youth', because there is no specific breakdown. That is why I was looking for that individual breakdown in how much has been budgeted.

Natalie SULEYMAN: Thank you. Just to outline for the benefit of the committee, last year YouthNav was launched, and this was also a project led by young people, and I am really proud to have been part of that. Young people actually were the author of YouthNav, and we have seen –

Jade BENHAM: What was the cost, Minister?

Natalie SULEYMAN: \$750,000.

Jade BENHAM: Great.

Natalie SULEYMAN: And this is an online platform. Again, it is important to note that this was co-designed by young people on the issues that matter to them, a one-stop hub online with practical information for young people. That has been something very important.

Jade BENHAM: Great. Sorry to interject, Minister. What has the website traffic been like? Do you have website data?

Natalie SULEYMAN: I will need to ask the Secretary.

Peta McCAMMON: Yes. I do not have that to hand, but I am happy that we can take that on notice.

Jade BENHAM: Great. Any of the information that I have not been able to get today, can we take that on notice? I realise this is the point of budget estimates.

The CHAIR: Excuse me, Ms Benham. You can ask a question and you can afford witnesses to answer that question, and then if they do not have the answer to the question, you can ask if they can take it on notice.

Jade BENHAM: On the point of order, Chair, the whole –

The CHAIR: Excuse me, Ms Benham. Excuse me, Minister. I have not raised a point of order, but if you would like to raise a point of order, please go ahead.

Jade BENHAM: Point of order, Chair.

Natalie SULEYMAN: Sorry, just to clarify, Chair, that we do have that information available –

Gerry GOSWELL: About website traffic.

Jade BENHAM: Great.

Natalie SULEYMAN: and we can respond to that question.

The CHAIR: Apologies, Ms Benham, you are out of time. We are going to Mr Hilakari.

Mathew HILAKARI: Thank you, Minister and officials. I appreciate your time this morning – it is still this morning, so that is okay. We are getting there. Minister, it was great to see you in Queen’s Hall and see some of the Scouts we had from Point Cook. I know your interest in the Scouts, and that was such a joyous occasion, with I think it was about 130-odd Scouts in the building.

Natalie SULEYMAN: Yes, it was.

Mathew HILAKARI: I was a really terrific one. But I might take you to youth infrastructure. Some of these elements follow on from the previous questioner. I take you to budget paper 3, page 45. I am just hoping you can talk about some of the local facilities and some of the supports that will be provided for young people in this budget?

Natalie SULEYMAN: Yes. Thank you so much, Mr Hilakari. It was lovely to see Scouts from Point Cook just recently. Of course this budget is about delivering for Scouts Victoria but also, more importantly, about ensuring that young people have the right infrastructure across Victoria so that they can thrive and know that government has their back. This is something that we are really proud of, and we are on track to demonstrate our commitment to young people. Since 2018 we have delivered 26 scout hall upgrades in local communities. Scouts, of course, is one of the biggest youth recreation movements not only in Victoria but in the nation, which is really intriguing to note. It is for a good reason. We have seen a number of upgrades benefit Scouts Victoria and local Scouts groups and their families through the modernisation works, whether that has been in Frankston or the Albert Park scout hall. And I want to talk about the Albert Park scout hall, where we saw a shell of a building which now is a facility that is used by the Scouts family but also, more importantly, the local community. Another example is a brand new athletic course out at Gilwell Park. I had the opportunity, with the Member for Monbulk, to go out there. It is an active space and course, probably more for young people than for me. It is a pretty intense course to get through.

Mathew HILAKARI: Have you taken the course already – or just part of it?

Natalie SULEYMAN: Let me say, I walked through and it was very intriguing, and I realised why I was never a Joey. Nevertheless, I know that it is a facility and a course that not only the Scouts but people across the state use and enjoy. We also know how important it is to have the right facilities for young Victorians. What is important to note is that through our youth strategy we have been able to deliver brand new and upgraded facilities in Nillumbik, Geelong and of course Wyndham, Mr Hilakari – that is in your area – as well. I have had the opportunity to also visit the Nillumbik Youth Hub, which is another investment, and to see the Nest – and I know Ms Kathage as well is aware of the Nest – in Geelong. These youth hubs are integral for young people, because they provide not only a place to gather but also those wraparound critical services that also take place in these hubs. It is important not only to have those safe spaces – the youth hubs – across our local communities, but it is also about providing those opportunities for young people to gain confidence, make new friends and connections and, most importantly, access service providers – whether that is education, training or transitioning into employment opportunities as well. These youth hubs are really important places for young people to gather. That is why in this budget we have a package that will deliver not only building works but also facilities for young people.

In Beaufort we are backing local Scout halls, and you will see again this particular hall requires some renovations to bring it back into a facility that can be accessed not only by Scouts but also the local community, as I have indicated previously. These facilities are really important, and we know that in this particular area both Scouts and the Girl Guides will have access to this hall in Beaufort. So as you can see, we are making investments right across, whether that is in metropolitan Melbourne or regional Victoria.

Another facility that I am really proud about and we will see is the Lalor Scout Hall in Epping in the north, where we are upgrading the hall – simple things such as bathroom facilities. This is a hall that is much loved by the local community. I know that having these upgraded facilities will allow the facility to be up to standard, which is really important for the Scouts and also for the local community.

Additional to that we will see Riddells Creek Scouts treetop camp. I know this is a popular facility and one that the local member has been actively supporting as well with her community in relation to restoring some of the shade sails. This is a great facility for the Riddells Creek Scouts. It not only addresses those particular Scouts, but also it encompasses the ability for them to host other scouting groups across Victoria to attend and train and engage in those activities.

Also the Ballarat Scouts water activity centre on Lake Wendouree – we will deliver refurbishing of their building, including important works to bring it again in line so it is fit for purpose for the young people and that local community. This is why our partnership with Scouts Victoria has been really important. As I indicated, we have been able to deliver 26 scout halls, and delivering these to Scouts Victoria and of course local communities, whether it is local communities or the Girl Guides or the mothers groups and other young people also having access to it, gives opportunity for local communities to be able to really use those facilities and have a hub where a number of uses can actually be performed from there.

Finally, I know, Mr Hilakari, you will be very pleased to hear about the brand new outdoor youth space at Manor Lakes. Chair, you will also know this. Wyndham is a rapidly growing community. It continues to grow each day, and with that in Melbourne's outer west we need to be able to deliver the right infrastructure to those communities. I am very pleased to be able to work on this new infrastructure with stakeholders and with young people to be able to encourage more active sports and recreation in these growing suburbs. So I am looking forward to the outdoor youth space and what that will encompass in Manor Lakes and working with the locals and stakeholders.

Mathew HILAKARI: Mr Lister, the Member for Werribee, will be just so pumped about that. He does talk about Manor Lakes and the importance of uplift of services in these areas in particular. I might take you to the Living Learning program, if that is okay, Minister. It is budget paper 3, page 38. It mentions in the budget the innovative support to re-engage young people, and there is \$7.5 million allocated in that line item over the next two years. I am just hoping you could speak to some of the elements of those programs.

Natalie SULEYMAN: Yes, sure. Thank you, Mr Hilakari. You are right, this is important investment: \$7.5 million. It is a powerful and important program for young people. Part of the Living Learning program, we know, is our partnership with the Melbourne City Mission, a well-known youth organisation with a strong track record in providing support for young people who need that additional support. As we know, not every young person starts on the same level playing field, and we are required to provide additional support services. I am very pleased to see that we will continue this important work with Melbourne City Mission, but also another one –

The CHAIR: Apologies, Minister. We are going to go to Mr Puglielli.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you, Chair. Good morning. Can I ask: in the department's assessment, which segments of Victoria's youth population are at most risk of disengagement?

Gerry GOSWELL: Thanks, Mr Puglielli. I think that there are a range of data points that the department uses to inform considerations about how we target funding within the youth portfolio. I think this year's state budget investment that the minister has briefly spoken to emphasises what some of those key cohorts are. So the 'Investing early in young Victorians' package particularly targets our investments in a number of multicultural communities, including our African Australian communities as well as our Afghan communities and the Pasifika community as well. There is significant data that demonstrates that outcomes for some young people in those communities around educational achievement and completion, for example, as well as mental ill health, are worse than their general peers. So this year's state budget investment targets those programs, and those programs have demonstrated success.

In addition, Mr Puglielli, I would also draw your attention to the Living Learning program, which the minister spoke about in her presentation. That targets young people who are significantly disengaged from school. Most of the young people in that program are actually not attending any mainstream school setting and need significant support to re-engage. Those young people have a mental health diagnosis, but in addition to that a number of those young people come from homes where there has been a history of family violence, as well as potentially other experiences of, for example, sexual abuse and other matters to that effect. Those are some of

the key cohorts that have been identified and are the focus of this year's budget investment through the youth portfolio.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. Can I ask, as a follow up: how does the department measure success in engaging these cohorts?

Gerry GOSWELL: Thank you, Mr Puglielli. I will make some comments and then throw over to the minister for her reflections as well. There are probably three layers of how we measure the success of these programs. I will speak specifically to the programs that were funded through this year's state budget. The Living Learning package and the 'Investing early in young Victorians' package are funded under the government's early intervention investment framework, or EIIF. Under EIIF we are required to provide data to the Department of Treasury and Finance, which measures the achievement of outcomes – that is, the outcomes that are achieved for young people through the program. That, for example, with Living Learning includes measurements such as average attendance at school – and we see significant increase in attendance – but also includes outcome measures such as average number of emergency department presentations per year. So there are a set number of outcome measures that we are required to report against for all the programs funded under EIIF.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Goswell. Minister, officials, thank you very much for taking the time to appear before us 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 very short break before beginning its consideration of the veterans portfolio at 12:05 pm. I declare this hearing adjourned.

Witnesses withdrew.