

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the 2025-26 Budget Estimates

Melbourne – Tuesday 3 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

Vicki Ward MP, Minister for Equality; and

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

Michael West, Director, Seniors Policy, Equality and Elder Abuse Reform, 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 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 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 Equality the Honourable Vicki Ward as well as officials from DFFH. Minister, I am going to invite you to make an opening presentation or statement of no more than 5 minutes, after which time the committee will ask you questions. Your time starts now.

Vicki WARD: Thank you very much, Chair, and thank you to the committee for giving me the time to present on the equality portfolio, including our government’s investments through the 2025–26 state budget.

I acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet today, the Wurundjeri people, including elders past and present, rainbow mob community members and Aboriginal people with us today, and I recognise over 60,000 years of connection and care for community and country.

Visual presentation.

Vicki WARD: It really is a privilege to be here with you all today as the new Minister for Equality. This portfolio touches the lives of so many Victorians. At least 11 per cent of Victorians are a part of LGBTIQ+ communities, and this increases to nearly 20 per cent when it comes to young Australians.

With voices of intolerance that get amplified in mainstream and social media now more than ever, as these communities are facing increasing vilification resulting in exclusion and harm, the work of the equality portfolio is crucial. The Allan Labor government remains committed to standing alongside our LGBTIQ+ communities and continues to deliver Victoria’s first-ever 10-year LGBTIQ+ strategy *Pride in Our Future*, launched in February 2022. This whole-of-government strategy is supporting Victoria to become a state where all Victorians feel safe, are healthy, have equal human rights and can live wholly and freely.

Over the last 12 months we have continued to deliver on our election commitments and create long-term LGBTIQ+ reform. In 2024–25, in partnership with Midsumma, we have delivered the annual pride march, Victoria’s Pride street party and regional activation program, with 12 events across Victoria and record attendance of nearly 113,000 people. In June 2024 we launched the ‘Unsaid Says a Lot’ campaign, a powerful campaign that demonstrates how subtle, non-verbal cues can affect whether trans or gender-diverse people can feel included or excluded. We have continued implementation of the Pride in Ageing, which is a four-year trial

to support and connect older LGBTIQ+ Victorians by reducing social isolation and assisting local organisations to build capability to better respond to the needs of these communities.

We have also supported 40 community and mental health organisations to provide inclusive care through the rollout of the Rainbow Tick national standards and accreditation program. We have also delivered \$2 million in grants across three competitive funding programs and strategic allocations, including the Pride Events and Festivals Fund, the LGBTIQ+ sector strengthening fund and our organisational development program. We continue to deliver the life-saving QHub program, providing safe spaces for LGBTIQ+ young people and their families of birth and choice in Ballarat and Geelong to prevent suicide, improve social connection and build confidence. The QHub program has supported 154 regional clients and families and has reached over 7000 people through community engagement sessions and school visits. We know our investment in QHub delivers a net benefit when one person avoids suicide every 5.23 years. This is absolute value-for-money investment. And we supported over 460 people in 2023–24 through the trans and gender-diverse peer support program delivered by Transgender Victoria.

On slide 4 you will see examples of what the Victorian government has achieved in partnership with community. It is clear that the government is continuing to drive equality reforms supporting LGBTIQ+ people to survive without fear of stigma or vilification. However, there continues to be work to do to ensure that LGBTIQ+ Victorians can freely and equally participate in this wonderful state, including through the implementation of the *Pride in Our Future* strategy in full. As we enter our fifth budget cycle of implementation of *Pride in Our Future*, our focus remains on supporting our diverse LGBTIQ+ communities, in particular trans and gender-diverse communities, who are facing increased vilification and stigma; embedding statewide improvements to inclusion through structural, systemic and place-based reforms; continuing to strengthen the sustainability and resilience of LGBTIQ+ community organisations; and continuing to create visibility by celebrating LGBTIQ+ Victorians through events and festivals.

Building on our previous historic funding, the 2025–26 state budget provides funding of \$1.5 million in 2025–26 for the equality portfolio to ensure the continuation of two vital programs: QHub and the trans and gender-diverse peer support program. In addition to these programs, our focus remains on building whole-of-government responses to improve outcomes for LGBTIQ+ Victorians, with a particular focus on improving health and mental health outcomes, responding to continued increasing threats to the safety of LGBTIQ+ Victorians, continuation of the Pride in Place program for LGBTIQ+ people at risk of homelessness and the implementation of the anti-vilification legislation.

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

Jade BENHAM: Thank you, Chair. Evening again, Minister. We are referencing the state budget ‘Department Performance Statement’, Department of Families, Fairness and Housing. It is page 51, even though my papers say page 46. The figures say that there is a reduction of \$1.1 million in overall funding for the LGBTIQ+ programs. Why has the government chosen to reduce overall funding?

Vicki WARD: Thanks very much for your question. I think that there should be an acknowledgement of the fact that we have invested more than any other government in our rainbow communities, and we have done more than any other government to support the LGBTIQ+ community. That includes the office of Minister for Equality as well as the LGBTIQ+ communities commissioner. Now, what you are talking about is some funding that was lapsing. Well, it is funding around the money that was to be spent on the – I am so sorry, my brain has just gone blank – ‘The Unsaid Says a Lot’ advertising campaign, where we are seeing different ways that we can actually put money out and get the message out there.

There is also the successful completion of a number of our government commitments, and that includes an evaluation of the QHub program, which we are continuing to fund in this budget. It is an extraordinary program, the QHub program. It is based in both Geelong and Ballarat. The work that they do and how they support young people in those communities – you yourself would know coming from a regional community that that sense of isolation is really real and that sense of not being able to see yourself reflected in anybody else is really real, so we have kids coming to Geelong and to Ballarat to feel that connection, to feel that they belong and to feel that they can be supported. It is really interesting when you go to one of the QHubs and you just see these kids relax. You see that they know that they can be themselves and that they are supported to be themselves. But what is also important about the QHubs is the work that parents do in engaging with the

QHubs, these parents who really just want the best for their kids. They are equipped, they are supported by those amazing staff at the QHubs to help them support their kids but also to help these parents as they work through what life means for them and for their kids.

Jade BENHAM: Are there any specific services or initiatives that are going to be affected by the \$1.1 million budget cut?

Vicki WARD: No, that is the main.

Jade BENHAM: Are there plans then to possibly expand the QHub or the trans and gender-diverse peer support program, and how would we be able to do that given the current budget cut? What is the plan?

Vicki WARD: Well, there is money in this budget. There is \$1 million in this budget to continue the QHubs and another \$0.5 million to continue the peer program. This is a pilot that has had the evaluation, and as we work through the evaluation – this is something for future budgets to consider, but from what I have seen of the work that QHub do, and the peer support program, they are very good programs.

Jade BENHAM: As far as regional support goes for LGBTIQA communities, beyond the QHubs in Ballarat and Geelong, going on budget paper 3, ‘Service Delivery’ in the 2025–26 budget, what other initiatives are directed towards supporting these communities in further reaching regional areas such as Mildura, Swan Hill and Echuca, for example?

Vicki WARD: Thank you for your question, and it is a good one. I am happy to keep having a conversation with you too about the needs of your regional community, because I know how isolated you can be in Mildura – it is not easy to jump on the bus –

Jade BENHAM: No, and there is no train.

Vicki WARD: Right.

Jade BENHAM: And the plane is expensive.

Vicki WARD: The plane is expensive. So being able to keep that conversation going, I am absolutely live to, and I really want to thank you for being open to that. There are grant opportunities that are there across organisations. There is money within this budget, which is recommitted to, which helps organisations grow and strengthen and it also helps them train to be able to create even more outreach work, and these are also located in regional communities. I do not think I have found one for Mildura that has received a grant, but there may be organisations who have applied, and if you are aware of these organisations, I would really encourage you reaching out to the department so we can work through how their grant applications may be stronger in the future. There are grant rounds out at the moment, though, so I would encourage them to apply if they have not already. I think there is another week to go.

Michael WEST: The current one has just closed.

Vicki WARD: It has just closed.

Michael WEST: There will be another grant round – our Pride Events and Festival Fund, which will be opening in July of the new financial year.

Vicki WARD: Yes. Let us bring Mardi Gras to Mildura. What do you reckon?

Jade BENHAM: Yes. That would be fantastic. Keep me in the loop with that one.

Vicki WARD: I will. These sector grants are really important, and it is really interesting. What it does is create platforms. Through the funding platforms are able to be created within that organisation to continue to build on their strengths. It includes areas like Wangaratta and Shepparton – they have all received funding at various times. I think something like 253 organisations over time have received funding amounts through this program. It is one that I would encourage regional communities to really look at. The other funding source that has been raised by Mr West is the pride events fund, which regional Victoria has subscribed really well to. A couple of years ago there was a really strong push by the department to ensure that regional Victoria really got a

good bite of that cherry, and they did. And we are continuing to see that our KPIs, if you like, of 25 per cent have been exceeded each year, and more and more of regional Victoria is having events. It is an economic boost to regional areas too when we have these events.

Jade BENHAM: That is a good segue actually to my next question. Can you provide details on the performance measures or the KPIs that you use to assess the effectiveness of the LGBTIQ equality programs?

Vicki WARD: Yes. It depends on the program as to the measure, so it can be things like engagement, it can be things around what it has meant for people when they have completed a program, but also when it is things like investing in these organisations, who they have been able to outreach, what kind of things they have been able to achieve whether it is through the training opportunities, whether it is being able to deliver a wider service range or whether it is being able to go out more into communities and deliver things. For example, there is the bus that is going out from Transcend –

Michael WEST: Affirmation Station.

Vicki WARD: Affirmation Station. I think that that will be a really interesting thing to watch, and there will be a variety of measures that will be able to be applied to that. The level of engagement is a really significant one, because we know that within the queer community there is a fear around engaging, because you do not know what you are going to encounter, so a marker of success absolutely is levels of engagement.

Jade BENHAM: Great. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. We are going to go straight to Mr Galea.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Chair. Good evening, Minister and officials. I am actually going to go on a pretty similar line of questioning to Ms Benham's, with the same budget reference but also budget paper 3, page 124, and that refers to the \$10.5 million in output funding in this portfolio as allocated under the budget. I note as well you have just mentioned regional grant programs, and I can see from the performance standards that that target of 25 per cent was exceeded and is expected to hit 29 per cent for those grants being distributed to regional Victoria just this year. Minister, can you talk me through some of the key aspects of what this funding will actually cover and achieve?

Vicki WARD: Thank you very much for your question, Mr Galea. I also really want to take this opportunity to thank you for your work that you do with the work groups. The engagement that you have got and the respect that you have got in the sector is really important, and I want to thank you for that.

We maintain our absolute intent to continue to invest in our LGBTIQ+ communities and to show our support for these communities. As the output funding in this year's budget for the equality portfolio reflects, our ongoing commitment and one we are not shying away from and will never shy away from talks to the continued implementation of initiatives and policies that will make this state a fair and inclusive place for everyone. We talk about 'more inclusive' – you are either inclusive or you are not, so this state works incredibly hard to be inclusive and we will continue to do that work. That is exactly what we continue to do with this budget and with this \$10.5 million investment.

We established the first equality portfolio, which I referred to earlier, and as I said in the answer to Ms Benham, the commissioner for LGBTIQ+ communities, and next month I think is the 10th anniversary of that position, which is fantastic. It is a milestone absolutely worth celebrating, because the commissioner plays a very important role, and it is not just the title, if you like, that is the role; it is the person and the work that they do and the extraordinary amount of work that the current commissioner Joe Ball is doing in going out to communities and engaging with as many people as possible and across the whole spectrum. Commissioner Ball is out engaging with sporting clubs. He is engaging with stakeholders within the LGBTIQ+ community. He is engaging with schools. He is having conversations everywhere, and the visibility of him as a trans man is incredibly important but also the message that he shows that there is a role in government for members of the LGBTIQ+ community and that there is a voice for that community in government as well. These are really important roles.

The portfolio drives our nation-leading work, and we are creating a more inclusive and cohesive state for all Victorians, including through continued implementation of our 10-year LGBTIQ+ strategy *Pride in Our*

Future. Over the past year we have delivered seven key government commitments to create long-term systemwide LGBTIQ+ reform across the state, and one of these is Pride in Ageing. It is interesting when you are talking to members of the queer community, and it is easy to forget history. I think we have to be conscious of the fact that many in our rainbow community who are ageing grew up in a time when homosexuality in this state was still illegal, so you can imagine when you are older how difficult it can be to have social engagement if you are not sure how you will be received. But it is also a challenge in how you even go into assisted living or an aged care facility. How are you going to be treated? How are you going to be respected? Are you going to feel welcome? This is one of the really important things that we are investing in, creating environments where older gay people can actually feel that there is a place for them where they belong, they can be safe and they can be exactly who they are, and this is really good work that is going on around the state. There are four areas which are doing this. It is a pilot that has got a particular focus on regional and peri-urban areas, and it will help people with limited opportunities to live better. Those four areas have been identified for exactly that purpose.

We are also working with Rainbow Health Australia, which achieves delivery of the Rainbow Tick accreditation program rollout to community health and mental health providers. Forty was the benchmark that we had last year, which has been met, and we anticipate that we will be able to deliver this to another 40 as well with the year that is coming up. That is being delivered by Rainbow Tick Australia.

Now, we are also investing \$1.6 million in grants to LGBTIQ+ communities, and this is to what we were just talking about before with my answer to Ms Benham where we were talking about the Pride Events and Festivals Fund. That supported 29 events from a pool of \$400,000 last year, with a focus on accessibility and inclusion, intersectionality and social connection. It was really interesting, Mr Galea, going to the Pride street party in Gertrude Street earlier this year and just seeing inclusion in action, because what it was was being at a venue, if you like, which is the street or the streets around it as well, but seeing that inclusion is really not as challenging as people might think it is, where you have got performers who have got somebody who is signing next to them, no matter what they are doing, helping to either describe what is going on or talk to the lyrics or the speeches or whatever is being given; where you have got portable changing stations, which I do not think I have ever seen before, where you can go to a festival and you have got somewhere to change your child or whoever you are looking after who might need it; and where you have got so many different points of people being able to feel safe and not just feel included but seen, and I think that this is one of the fundamental things. We have spoken a bit in the meetings that I have had around that intersectionality that the rainbow community offers, and I think that when we see things like the Pride street party it is a really good example of that intersectionality done really, really well. I think that there are some learnings that across the board the wider community could have around how to do inclusion well.

We have also funded the LGBTIQ+ Sector Strengthening program, which is what we were referring to before, with 13 organisations who received funding totalling \$800,000 through the program in 2024–25, and a third of the funded projects will be delivered in or led by organisations in regional and rural Victoria. Then there is the organisational development program which provides \$400,000 for LGBTIQ+ community groups and organisations to build their capacity, foster resilience and create local networks. They are really good grants, and it is really interesting when you go out to these organisations who will talk about what a benefit they have been and how they have really helped strengthen their organisation.

Now, we did launch our Australia-first – and it is award-winning; it won a gold award on the weekend, which is very exciting – The Unsaid Says A Lot campaign, and that really addresses the discrimination that is faced by trans and gender-diverse communities. It is a really simple campaign in the sense that it shows how exclusion and how you react yourself and the language that you use can actually be really harmful and can really hurt a person and really damage a person. So having this ad that goes across different platforms, showing how really simple things like seeing somebody, acknowledging somebody and just being kind are really important, particularly to people who are generally quite vulnerable. I really want to give a shout-out to the ad agency and everybody who created this campaign, because it is very good.

Now, we have also been partnering with Midsumma, which is Australia's leading LGBTIQ+ arts and cultural organisation, to deliver another incredible series of events including our LGBTIQ+ communities. When you have got 113,000 people coming across the state to Pride events over that period, it is pretty extraordinary, and it shows you the depth of support that there is for having a bit of fun, but also it really talks to the economic benefits that come with supporting our LGBTIQ+ communities. When you see that people will come to events, the visitor economy is there; people are spending their money in these communities that are celebrating

these events. As I was talking before about Victoria's Pride Street Party, 60,000 people turned up to that event, and it was phenomenal. I went around and spoke to a number of the different stallholders and the organisations that were there, and people were having a great time, and they were really excited to be able to talk to any number of people about the services, about the things that they sell, about the things that they do, because with 60,000 people coming through it is a very good audience. Of course this year the 2025 Pride march marked the 30th anniversary, and it drew in nearly 30,000 participants, including 10,000 marchers, I think, of which you and I were two of them.

Michael GALEA: We were just two.

Vicki WARD: And it was very, very hot; it was very hot.

Michael GALEA: As it always is. Thank you, Minister – a lot to unpack there. I certainly join with you in acknowledging the work of our LGBTIQ+ Commissioner Joe Ball and the incredible work that he does. I also note the work that you do, given that you are, as far as I am aware, the only Minister for Equality in the country, so it is a very, very important role.

Vicki WARD: They will catch up.

Michael GALEA: They will catch up. In terms of some of the more specific things – again, you have touched on this a little bit with Ms Benham already, but in terms of the Q+ hubs both in Geelong and Ballarat, can you talk to me a little bit about how the funding in this budget is going to support those services to expand and grow?

Vicki WARD: Thanks very much for your question, and thanks for giving me an opportunity to elaborate on the QHubs a little bit more. There is a \$1 million investment in this year's budget for the next 12 months to be able to continue the great work that the QHub does. As I said, we have got them in Geelong and Ballarat, and that followed an investment of \$2.85 million in the 2022–23 budget to help support young people and their families in regional areas, linking them with vital services while also promoting wellbeing and social connection. The program funding was in response to a proposal that identified the need for further targeted LGBTIQ+ wellbeing support in western Victoria, and this came about through the really, really – 'tragic' is such an often-used word, but it was through some suicides that had occurred in western Victoria and the need to actually do something to prevent them.

Michael GALEA: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Galea. We will go straight to Mr Puglielli.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you, Chair. Good evening, Minister, I understand the government has committed to building an intersex protection system. It has consulted on these plans. A summary report and next steps were due to be released early 2024. I also understand we are expecting legislation this year to protect children from deferrable medical interventions which modify their sex characteristics. To your visibility, is this still on track? When can we expect this legislation?

Vicki WARD: Yes, it is. It is legislation that is being led by the Minister for Health, and I really want to thank her for the leadership that she has shown in progressing this. I know that she made a commitment to the taskforce last year that she would continue this work, and I really want to thank her for meeting with the taskforce and for showing how seriously she and the government take this issue. It is a really serious issue. To have that autonomy over yourself, even if you are a very small being, is really important. This is work that I am determined to see through, and I know the Minister for Health is too. I think that it is about helping to preserve someone's autonomy, but it is also about helping to protect and ensure their reproductive health as well. I think that by putting these protections in place we are making sure that, when people get to an age where they are ready to make a decision about what medical intervention, if any, they need, they are able to do so rather than have it taken out of their hands before they are really conscious of knowing what could or may be needed for them.

There is frustration amongst dedicated and longstanding intersex advocates around these important reforms. I know that they really want to see them done. The needs of people with innate variations in sex characteristics are diverse, and they have been misunderstood and overlooked. I really do acknowledge the distress that people

feel about that. It is very real. I am sorry that it has been a long journey for them, and I really want to thank them for their ongoing advocacy and the work that they do. There is a sorrow about how hard this has been for so many people over so many decades – as you grow and realise that decisions were taken out of your hands, that you are powerless to do anything to reverse or to change. We are committed to safety and equality for all Victorians, and that includes improving the health and wellbeing outcomes and experiences of care for people with innate variations of sex characteristics. We did commission the *(i) Am Equal: Future Directions for Victoria's Intersex Community* paper, and what the paper did was provide a range of initiatives to support intersex Victorians, including establishing an intersex protection system, a dedicated wellbeing centre and a suite of intersex resources for children, families and health professionals.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: It is a very short time always, but thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, Minister. Minister and department officials, thank you very much for taking the time to appear 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. If anyone listening to or watching this session has found the content distressing, help is available. You can give Rainbow Door a call on 1800 729 367 or send a text message to 0480 017 246. Alternatively, you can call QLife on 1800 184 527. The committee is going to take a very short break before beginning its consideration of the natural disaster portfolio at 6:50 pm. I declare this hearing adjourned.

Witnesses withdrew.