

# **PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE**

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

Melbourne – Wednesday 11 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

Ros Spence MP, Minister for Carers and Volunteers; and

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 broadcast live 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 said may be picked up and captioned, even if you say it quietly.

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.

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.

I welcome the Minister for Carers and Volunteers the Honourable Ros Spence 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 questions. Your time starts now.

**Ros SPENCE:** Thank you, Chair, and thank you for the opportunity to present on the carers and volunteers portfolio. Firstly, can I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land we are meeting on and pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging.

### Visual presentation.

**Ros SPENCE:** The carers and volunteers portfolio aims to strengthen economic and social participation and resilience in Victorian communities. We work to boost critical social and volunteer infrastructure, including across the food relief sector, neighbourhood houses and men's sheds, and invest in supports for Victorians doing it tough. Over the past 12 months the portfolio has delivered support to help ease cost-of-living pressures. More than \$43 million continues to support around 400 neighbourhood houses, providing a broad range of employment, education, social and volunteering opportunities.

We are also continuing to support the critical operations of the state's six regional food shares – in Albury–Wodonga, Bendigo, Geelong, Mildura, Shepparton and Warrnambool. From July to December 2024 regional food shares distributed more than 1.36 million kilos of food, equating to around 2.7 million meals. We delivered 116 grants through the first round of the community food relief program. This included \$2.5 million to 73 neighbourhood houses. Grants are strengthening regional and statewide operations; for example, helping SecondBite/FareShare purchase a 10-pallet truck, which has increased monthly deliveries of rescued food and meals by over 50 per cent since February. We also invested \$3.7 million in the Good Money program, which provides access to no-interest loans, financial supports and advice. The portfolio invests \$1 million each year for the men's shed funding program. Twenty-nine men's sheds shared in grants totalling more than \$879,000 in 2024–25, building well-equipped spaces for men to work on projects, make friends and improve their health and wellbeing.

The portfolio also recognises and supports Victoria's unpaid carers, with \$22.4 million invested annually in the Support for Carers program and a further \$9.5 million each year to provide additional respite for carers. Providers across the state will receive up to \$1 million annually over two years to deliver additional respite services, to June 2027, through the program's second funding round. Our Victorian Carer Card provides primary carers with public transport concessions and discounts on products and services.

The 2025–26 state budget builds upon these efforts by investing a further \$18 million over three years in food security initiatives. This brings the government's investment since 2020 to more than \$74 million, expanding food relief infrastructure, strengthening sector partnerships and delivering more food for Victorians in need. This investment targets the regions, doubling support for all of the state's six regional food shares and the Regional Food Security Alliance as well as boosting regional charity freight services through Foodbank Victoria over two years. We will also deliver a second round of the community food relief program to help meet demand for food relief across the state, and we will invest in Foodbank Victoria's innovative GROW program in recognition of the critical links between food supply and security.

In addition \$5.1 million over four years will expand the Good Money program delivered by Good Shepherd Australia New Zealand. The new investment will expand Good Shepherd's no-interest loans coordination scheme and will provide thousands more Victorians with access to no-interest loans for whitegoods, essential household items and housing-related expenses, such as rental bonds. It is part of our commitment to respond to rising cost-of-living pressures and to support Victorians experiencing financial hardship.

To conclude, I want to recognise all of those volunteers who dedicate their time and resources to support their communities, families and loved ones, including our carers and volunteers. Nominations are open for the 2025 Victorian Volunteering Awards until 4 July, and I look forward to celebrating the finalists later this year. Thank you, Chair.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much, Minister. The next 8 minutes is going to Ms Benham.

**Jade BENHAM:** Thank you, Chair. Afternoon again, Minister. Minister, there appears to be no specific allocation for carers and volunteers in the budget papers since the portfolio of disability, carers and ageing was separated into three separate portfolios. Can you confirm that it is not a specific allocation in these budget papers, but it is spread across those portfolios that deal with carers and volunteers?

**Ros SPENCE:** It is spread across two output measures in the budget. It is the 'Community Participation' budget item and the second is 'Seniors Programs and Participation'. So it is across those two lines.

**Jade BENHAM:** Okay. Can you tell us what the allocation is specifically to carers and volunteers?

**Ros SPENCE:** I can refer you to page 124 of budget paper 3, and you can see those two lines. In regard to community participation, all of that line item –

**Jade BENHAM:** All of it?

**Ros SPENCE:** All of it is for carers and volunteers. If we go to seniors programs and participation, around 60 per cent of the current is for carers and volunteers.

**Jade BENHAM:** How does that compare to the 2024–25 budget?

**Ros SPENCE:** I might defer.

**Gerry GOSWELL:** Thank you, Minister. The community participation output has increased. The 2025–26 budget for community participation output, as the minister said, all of that goes to the carers and volunteers portfolio. It is \$69.7 million. That is about 8 per cent higher, Ms Benham, than the 2024–25 output target for the same. With the seniors programs and participation output, as the minister said, about 60 per cent of that sits within this portfolio, and the budget allocation for carers is the same as 2024–25, so it is continuing at level.

**Jade BENHAM:** Okay. It is continuing at that level. If we go to the 'Department Performance Statement' on page 44, that relates to the number of carers provided with respite and support services. The expected outcome for 2024–25 is over 38,000 carers, yet the forecast for 2025–26 is only 13,250, representing about a

65 per cent reduction on the previous year. The reason given is that carers will be reached through online group events as part of a move to online service delivery. So how is respite delivered online?

**Ros SPENCE:** It is not. It is not all respite; it is support services as well. When we talk about respite it is in a very broad term. It has been made really clear by the sector that they do not just want what we would call that traditional form of respite. It is about connection, it is about support and it is about being able to access and talk to people about what supports and what your particular circumstances are. A lot of that is done online, and that has brought the capacity to deliver to more people, which has had really great benefits.

**Jade BENHAM:** So which agency is it that delivers the online sessions?

**Ros SPENCE:** There are quite a number.

**Gerry GOSWELL:** Yes. Minister, I can speak to that.

**Ros SPENCE:** Thank you.

**Gerry GOSWELL:** We do fund a large number of carer support groups, Ms Benham, through the portfolio. We fund through two programs primarily that actually contribute to that target that you have mentioned in the DPS. The first of those, Ms Benham, is the support for carers program. That is funded at \$22.4 million per annum recurrently, and we fund 60 providers through that program.

**Jade BENHAM:** Have you got a list of those?

**Gerry GOSWELL:** I do have a list of those, Ms Benham.

**Mathew HILAKARI:** Please read them all.

**Jade BENHAM:** No, do not read them all. I have only got 8 minutes.

**Gerry GOSWELL:** Actually, what I will tell you, Ms Benham, is it is published on the department's website.

**Jade BENHAM:** It is on the department's website?

**Gerry GOSWELL:** Yes.

**Jade BENHAM:** Okay. Terrific. Thank you, Mr Hilakari. The same section of the budget, on page 44, says the number of carer respite hours has basically halved from over half a million – 519,522 hours – to 261,250. How do you explain halving of the carer respite hours?

**Ros SPENCE:** I do not know that that is the case.

**Gerry GOSWELL:** I am not sure that is the case, Ms Benham. Sorry, we are just finding the reference here. I am just trying to find the 500 reference.

**Jade BENHAM:** We can come back to that, if you like, because I have got quite the list.

**Ros SPENCE:** Is this the respite and support hours?

**Jade BENHAM:** Yes.

**Ros SPENCE:** That had a 2024 target of –

**Jade BENHAM:** That 519,000, and it has basically halved to –

**Gerry GOSWELL:** Sorry, which page is that, Ms Benham, in the DPS?

**Jade BENHAM:** 44.

**Gerry GOSWELL:** Thank you.

**Jade BENHAM:** While we are looking into that, can we talk about the neighbourhood houses?

**Ros SPENCE:** Sorry, I do have that one.

**Jade BENHAM:** We will come back to neighbourhood houses.

**Ros SPENCE:** That basically came out of the COVID period, when there were additional hours provided, but also some work is being done to make sure that the reporting of hours provided is consistent. That is why the target, again, is at the previous target, because that is what we more expect the actual hours to be. We just need to make sure that everyone is reporting that in the same way so that we have got consistency across the state.

**Jade BENHAM:** Okay. So, taking into account the move to online interaction and services, why is the number of carers being serviced reduced by a third? Shouldn't online service delivery be expanding the number of people being assisted?

**Ros SPENCE:** There is no reduction. It is the same target as the 2024–25 target.

**Jade BENHAM:** Okay. In the interests of time, I am going to move on. In the presentation earlier you mentioned the funding of neighbourhood houses. There are areas such as Omeo, which have been bushfire impacted, wanting funding support for their neighbourhood houses but not receiving it. Is the funding for neighbourhood houses capped, and if so, why?

**Ros SPENCE:** Are you saying that they do not receive any neighbourhood house funding or that they are not getting funding to deal with the damage that they –

**Jade BENHAM:** To deal with the damage.

**Ros SPENCE:** Okay. There is a grants process where they can apply for funds of up to \$100,000 for works at the neighbourhood house. It is not just for new neighbourhood houses. It is also to provide upgrades and improvements, and it has also been expanded now for equipment – there was feedback from the sector that they really need access to that. There are the neighbourhood house grants that they would be able to access if they are a recognised neighbourhood house.

**Jade BENHAM:** Up to \$100,000?

**Ros SPENCE:** Sorry, was it a men's shed or a neighbourhood house that you were talking about?

**Jade BENHAM:** It is a neighbourhood house, but apparently they do not receive any funding support.

**Ros SPENCE:** Okay, sorry; I misunderstood and thought you were referring to a men's shed.

**Jade BENHAM:** Yes, I was going to say is that the \$100,000 grant for the men's shed. No, Omeo neighbourhood house does not receive any funding, any support. They just want some recurrent funding of \$20K to keep operating.

**Ros SPENCE:** Right. Well, we have got the list, and Gerry is doing some very fast work.

**Gerry GOSWELL:** Thank you, Ms Benham. I can see that, yes, there is not an organisation called Omeo neighbourhood house that is funded. We do fund 400 neighbourhood houses, around 400, as part of the program.

**Jade BENHAM:** Why not that one?

**Gerry GOSWELL:** We continue to work with local sector organisations. We would absolutely be happy for organisations to approach the department, and we can discuss what supports are available in their area. We have good coverage across the state with, as I said, more than 400 funded.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Ms Kathage.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Thank you, Chair, Minister and officials. Minister, pages 38 and 40 of BP3 set out some funding that we have there and the context of serious cost-of-living challenges for people and families. That is in Victoria and across all of Australia. That funding that is there – the investment there – how is that helping people who are finding it harder to access food, basically, to feed their families? How is it improving their ability to do that?

**Ros SPENCE:** Thank you for your question. This is a really important issue, and we know that so many Victorians are facing difficulties as a result of increasing cost of living, particularly in relation to food security and the availability of fresh, healthy and culturally appropriate food. Also, as a result of that we know that the sector is facing really unprecedented demand, and you know that yourself – we have been out to Whittlesea neighbourhood house and spoken to the people out there about the impact that the program is having for that community. They have been very clear about the positive benefits that they are seeing, and we are very thankful to them for the work that they do. I am really pleased that we have in fact since 2020 invested more than \$74 million to strengthen food security and to ensure that more food actually reaches Victorians who need it.

The 2025–26 budget builds upon these efforts with a significant investment of \$18 million over three years to continue strengthening that food security across Victoria. This includes \$6 million over two years to maintain and grow the work of the state's six regional food shares. As I mentioned before, they are in Albury–Wodonga, Bendigo, Geelong, Mildura, Shepparton and Warrnambool, alongside shared services through the Regional Food Security Alliance. These organisations are absolutely vital in helping people living in the regions to access food relief. Between July and September 2024 the six regional food shares distributed more than 1.36 million kilograms of food, equivalent to approximately 2.7 million meals for regional Victorians. This is an extraordinary achievement, and I want to take this opportunity to sincerely thank them and all of their dedicated volunteers for the work that they do.

In addition, we are investing \$9 million to deliver a second expanded round of the community food relief program. This is providing competitive grants to strengthen food relief efforts at the local, regional and state levels, and if I recall rightly, Whittlesea neighbourhood house was a beneficiary of one of those grants. This investment doubles the program investment from the 2024–25 round, which supported 116 organisations to boost food relief delivery, to build capacity and to also respond to local food insecurity right across the state. It will also support Foodbank with its regional charity freight over two years, enabling them to distribute approximately 480,000 kilograms of fresh and chilled produce to charity partners in rural and regional areas right across the state.

We are committing \$3 million over three years to Foodbank Victoria's GROW program as well, and this redirects surplus farm produce to families in need. This is on top of the existing \$3.3 million in core operational funding that Foodbank receive annually. In 2023–24 Foodbank Victoria delivered over 9200 tonnes of food through 499 charity partners across the state, and I also extend my deep thanks to Foodbank and their volunteers for their really incredible work and their continued partnership.

We look forward to working alongside the entire food relief sector to coordinate, to strengthen and to expand our efforts to support Victorians doing it tough.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** I think if there is any silver lining to the context we find ourselves in, it is seeing those smaller orgs – local organisations – really step up to help their community when they are in need. So what support is available for those more local food delivery organisations?

**Ros SPENCE:** Thank you. And as we have seen firsthand, they are incredibly important. The community food relief program has been an invaluable support to a really wide range of organisations, both at a grassroots level in our local communities and through broader statewide providers. The programs help to ensure that more Victorians can access that really essential food support, regardless of where they live or what their personal circumstances are. I am really thrilled that through the budget we are delivering that expanded round of the community food relief program with a really significant investment of \$9 million.

The program offers grants through two streams, including a local stream and a coordination stream. As you have rightly noted, the local stream is crucial for our community food relief providers, neighbourhood houses and volunteer-run charities, as well as other small grassroots organisations who have adapted and evolved to meet the growing demand.

Many of these groups have had to pivot their service delivery, stepping up in different ways to meet community needs. Others, like out at Whittlesea, have just added to their pile of things that they do, and we are grateful for the great work they do in continuing to provide for that community.

We have seen some other really exceptional projects come from the last round, including at Banksia Gardens community centre, for example. They received a grant to purchase a new fridge and freezer and additional healthy and nutritious food for distribution to families and people that have reduced mobility. We have also seen local neighbourhood houses play a huge role in delivering food, and that is why this investment supports neighbourhood houses providing food relief to support and strengthen these vital local partnerships and to allow them to continue their important work in communities.

We recognise the critical work that these local community and volunteer-led organisations and neighbourhood houses play in providing food relief in Victoria, ensuring that people can eat healthy, nutritious food when they need it most at the places that they often are already familiar with and can often get additional supports that they might be in need of. I look forward to seeing the next round of inspiring community-led projects through the 2025–26 community food relief program.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Thank you. My parents are long-time Meals on Wheels volunteers, so I know that volunteers get a lot out of it as well; it really complements their life. On the larger scale, the statewide scale, you mentioned a bit about freighting food out to the wider state, but what larger sort of organisations are being funded to help cover food security more broadly across the state?

**Ros SPENCE:** We are really fortunate in Victoria to have some really great food security organisations like SecondBite, FareShare, OzHarvest and the Regional Food Security Alliance, just to name a few. I will of course take the opportunity to thank them as well and their volunteers for the vital work that they are doing. The community food relief program aims to meet increased demand for food relief and build the capacity of food security initiatives in local communities and begin to address the drivers of food insecurity right across the state. It includes the two funding streams, including the coordination stream, and this stream has a really strong focus on strengthening the food relief supply and distribution approaches across Victoria, with particular attention on regional areas. Through the budget, that \$9 million that we are investing will go to that expanded round of the community food relief grants.

In 2024–25 the program delivered coordination grants to Geelong Foodshare, OzHarvest, SecondBite, FareShare and the Regional Food Security Alliance, and through this we distributed \$250,000 for Geelong Foodshare to establish a new distribution process across western Victoria, including to Warrnambool, Colac and Golden Plains shire, with capacity building and advice to smaller regional food hubs, including in Horsham. There was \$250,000 to SecondBite to buy a 10-pallet truck to boost delivery capacity to regional Victoria, in partnership with the Regional Food Security Alliance and regional FoodShares; \$200,000 for Regional Food Security Alliance to formalise partnerships with OzHarvest and SecondBite to improve coordination and data sharing, to develop a regional logistics strategy and to trial systems to improve efficiency; and \$200,000 to OzHarvest to establish a new warehouse and distribution centre in south-east Melbourne. This will improve efficiency and support a lot more organisations that are on their waitlist. I look forward to seeing the excellent projects that come out of this next round of funding and the ways that they similarly support statewide food relief right across Victoria, because we know that these initiatives in the last round are doing really great work and having great outcomes.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** Thank you. I want to go to neighbourhood houses specifically now. Minister, as you said, Whittlesea Community House delivers a lot for our community. You have been at their fundraising events, you have been to the house itself to see how they are supporting what they call the working poor with food boxes, their ladies who lunch and their men's breakfast programs, supporting the community in so many ways. What support are we delivering for other neighbourhood houses so they can also meet the bar that has been set by Whittlesea?

**Ros SPENCE:** Meet the bar indeed. In the short amount of time that I have got I will just say that we are really proud to commit more than \$43 million to the neighbourhood house coordination program each year, and that supports the social and economic participation of locals, particularly among vulnerable groups. This supports around 400 neighbourhood houses to be operational across the state. We also know that the houses themselves do an absolute power of work to make sure that they make every dollar go as far as it can and to



bring in additional funds. We know at Whittlesea they are using the container deposit scheme to boost the services that they can provide. It is a fantastic initiative.

**The CHAIR:** Apologies, Minister and Ms Kathage. We are going to go to Mr Puglielli.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon. Budget paper 3, page 124, the 'Output summary' – Minister, are you aware of any budget bids submitted on behalf of carer and family support organisation Different Journeys? They are an organisation which provides peer support to carers and people with autism.

**Ros SPENCE:** Yes, I am. I meet with Different Journeys regularly, and I know that they have found great value from the funding that they have received. They did a program about carers in employment and worked with the State Library to further that work. They have briefed me on the great outcomes that they have had. They are also providing input into the carer strategy refresh. Yes, we have regular meetings, and they keep me informed as to the great work that they are doing.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Great. Are they receiving any funding in this budget?

**Ros SPENCE:** They receive funding through – I will let Gerry go to that.

**Gerry GOSWELL:** Yes. They are funded currently through the additional respite for carers program. We are just in the process of finalising the assessment of applications for the next funding round, which will run from July 2025 through to June 2027, and the minister will make an announcement about those future funding arrangements shortly.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** When you say 'shortly', is there a timeline we can put to that?

**Gerry GOSWELL:** I would say this month.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Great. Okay.

**Gerry GOSWELL:** Shortly is shortly. In the case of additional respite for carers, we know it is really important for those organisations to receive funding certainty as soon as possible.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Okay. Thank you. Just speaking more broadly, Minister, in your assessment, what proportion of carer and volunteer organisations are submitting state budget bids in the lead-up to a state budget?

**Ros SPENCE:** I could not give you a percentage.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** It does not have to be a percentage. Is it the majority? Is it many?

**Ros SPENCE:** No.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** No?

**Ros SPENCE:** No, I would say that it is a rather small number. A lot of the smaller organisations might indeed go to one of their peak bodies, be that Volunteering Victoria for volunteers or to Carers Victoria for carers, and I would guess they would advocate to that peak body, who would then advocate on behalf of the entire sector.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Okay. Minister, in your assessment, is that approach sustainable for ongoing funding for the sustainability of these organisations?

**Ros SPENCE:** Funding for community organisations is always really difficult, and they could always do with more. That is the reality. I am not inundated with funding requests through the budget process from individual organisations.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Would you advise them, though, that potentially they should write to you? Is that the approach you would prefer?

**Ros SPENCE:** I do not know that it would make a lot of difference. Everything gets considered when it is received, and we obviously have ongoing dialogue with both of the peak bodies. That is the point of them.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Okay. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Mr Puglielli and Minister. Minister and officials, thank you very much for appearing before the committee today. The committee will follow up on any questions taken on notice in writing, and responses are required within five working days of the committee's request. The committee will take a very short break before beginning its consideration of the community sport portfolio at 5:05 pm. I declare this hearing adjourned.

**Witnesses withdrew.**