

# **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 Community Sport; and

Georgina McCann, Deputy Secretary, Sport and Experience Economy, and

Natalie Phillips, Executive Director, Community Sport and Recreation, Department of Jobs, Skills, Industry and Regions.

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

I ask that mobile telephones please be turned to silent.

I begin by acknowledging the traditional Aboriginal owners of the land on which we are meeting, the lands of the Wurundjeri people. We pay our respects to them, their elders past, present and emerging as well as elders from other communities who may be here with us today.

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, any comments repeated outside of these hearings 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 may be picked up and captioned, no matter how quietly you say it.

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 Community Sport the Honourable Ros Spence as well as officials from DJSIR. 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 some questions. Your time starts now.

**Ros SPENCE:** Thank you, Chair, and thank you to the committee. Thank you for the opportunity to report on the status of the Victorian community sport and active recreation sector. Can I also begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land that we are meeting on, the Wurundjeri people, and pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging.

### Visual presentation.

**Ros SPENCE:** I have had the honour of serving as the Minister for Community Sport for five years now, and it continues to be really inspiring for me to see the dedication, the collaboration and the shared purpose our clubs, associations, leagues and peak bodies bring to supporting Victorians to get active. The community sport and recreation sector is a major contributor to Victoria's social, cultural and economic wellbeing. Almost 3.8 million Victorian adults are physically active at least once a week, with around half of adults participating at least three times a week. The facilities that our clubs call home are often the central point for the whole community, particularly in our regional and rural areas. Across the state there are approximately 10,000 facilities. These facilities generate an estimated \$7 billion worth of direct and indirect economic benefits to Victoria annually, including \$2.6 billion in social benefits. The wider sport and recreation sector supports an estimated 71,000 full-time jobs, and more than 750,000 Victorians volunteer in sport and recreation. This includes helping out as officials and as coaches, and I want to take a moment to thank the staff and volunteers who work hard to keep our sector going week in, week out.

The Victorian government has provided significant support over the past year to the sector to ensure our clubs, leagues and associations can continue to provide all Victorians opportunities to participate. We have continued to deliver the Get Active Kids voucher program, which provides payments of up to \$200 to help Victorian families to get their children involved in their favourite sport and recreation activities. I am pleased to say that almost 190,000 vouchers have been distributed through the program to date, and around half of recipients reported that they would not have been able to participate without the assistance provided. We have also provided more than \$1.3 million in support through both the sporting clubs and Aboriginal sport participation grant programs. As of December 2024, all 79 Victorian councils have adopted a gender-equitable access and use policy in line with the *Fair Access Policy Roadmap*, and in 2024–25 significant progress has been made on the regional sports infrastructure program, with the first project – the world-class BMX venue in Shepparton – officially opening in April. The venue successfully hosted the 2025 AusCycling BMX national series round 1 and 2 events on Saturday 26 and Sunday 27 April of this year.

The 2025–26 budget reflects the Victorian government's continued commitment to support Victorians participating in community sport and recreation. \$20 million is being invested to continue delivering high-quality and accessible community sports infrastructure. This includes the continuation of the Local Sports Infrastructure Fund. We will prioritise infrastructure investment in disadvantaged communities and for groups with lower participation in sport and active recreation. \$20.3 million is provided over two years, and that is being provided to continue support for community sport and active recreation programs that address key barriers to participation. This includes \$15 million to continue delivering the popular Get Active Kids voucher program for another two years, helping more than 65,000 kids who need it. The voucher program covers over 70 sports and more than 2100 activity providers across the state. This helps to ensure every child across Victoria has the chance to participate and assists families with the cost of participating in sport. Thank you, Chair.

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

**Jade BENHAM:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you again, Minister. I want to talk about the office for women in sport. The Office for Women in Sport and Recreation provided a representative voice for women in this field and in particular oversaw the fair access policy, which you spoke about in the presentation, that is underpinned by the *Gender Equality Act*. This office appears to have now been axed in this budget. Why have you axed this office, and was this advice provided to you by a man?

**Ros SPENCE:** Channelling your best Bev?

**Jade BENHAM:** Well, was it, Minister?

**Ros SPENCE:** The office for women in sport is not receiving funding in the budget, but what I will say is that the programs, particularly those key programs such as the fair access policy and the balance-the-board policy, are going to be taken within the department and will continue to be delivered. It is just that the office itself will not be funded this year.

**Jade BENHAM:** So all of those measurable, equitable access key points will be monitored within each organisation?

**Ros SPENCE:** Correct. Can I just add to that, though, it was not just the office of women in sport that was providing programs that supported and encouraged women to participate. That is actually embedded in every program that is being delivered. There is priority given to disadvantaged cohorts and cohorts that have lower participation, and what we have been addressing there is the lower participation of women and girls and also the need to have universal design principles. When new facilities are being built or being upgraded, they are embedded. That is not part of the office of women in sport.

**Jade BENHAM:** The Change Our Game program, though, which was from that office, made huge steps in getting women and girls actively involved in sport, so is this a backwards step?

**Ros SPENCE:** Well, you can look at it that way or you can look at it how I do and say it is great that we have been able to embed these principles across all of our programs, and of course we need to keep doing that. This is really important work.

**Jade BENHAM:** Are women currently getting equal access to community sporting facilities? Because I know out in the region, there is still a lot of work to be done, particularly with women's football. We saw Erin Phillips yesterday enter the hall of fame after being told, like many of us when we were 13, that she could not play anymore. There are still a lot of accessibility problems, I suppose.

**Ros SPENCE:** There are, and that is why the fair access code is so important. As of the end of last year, every local government has a fair access policy. That is important for a number of reasons. One, it is that universal design and making sure that these principles are embedded at the start of an infrastructure program, and also when you are upgrading and making sure that you are looking at it then as well, but it is also about making sure that women and girls have access to the good ovals and the good times.

**Jade BENHAM:** Correct.

**Ros SPENCE:** This is the whole intent of it. It is making clubs in themselves and local government as the broader agency look at how clubs are operating in total – in all of their operations. Are you giving the not-so-good outcomes to your less preferred? Do you want the senior men's playing all of the good times and only on the good oval? No.

**Jade BENHAM:** Well, not if they are losing and the women are winning, would be my answer.

**Ros SPENCE:** Correct. So getting that work embedded has been really important, and that will continue to be worked on and monitored by Sport and Recreation Victoria.

**Jade BENHAM:** Great. Have you got a breakdown of the progress being made by each council over the last five years and how far they have come with access to –

**Ros SPENCE:** I doubt that we would have that, because we only had the fair access policy at the end of last year. It is a pretty new program. What I can say for the last five years is that we have prioritised participation and involvement by women and girls across all of our programs, and we have certainly seen massive increases in participation numbers and club pride.

**Jade BENHAM:** Absolutely. Can we have a look at some of the outcomes and the figures where Change Our Game has really had an impact? I am happy to take that on notice in the interest of time, if possible.

**Ros SPENCE:** Yes.

**Jade BENHAM:** Yes. Great. Thank you so much. As far as community sports infrastructure goes, the DJSIR budget questionnaire, page 20, the 'Delivering community sports infrastructure and basketball hubs program' was slashed from \$14.7 million to just \$1.4 million with no explanatory note. Why has the funding for this program been cut by over 90 per cent in 2025–26?

**Ros SPENCE:** I know that it was a time set – the funds were provided over a certain amount of time. That time came to an end, and it has been extended for additional time.

**Jade BENHAM:** At 1.4. Is that for the basketball high-performance hubs?

**Ros SPENCE:** I am presuming so. What was your reference again, sorry?

**Jade BENHAM:** It is the DJSIR budget questionnaire. It is page 20, third line down, which is 'Delivering community sports infrastructure and basketball hubs'. The original funding allocation for 2024–25 was \$14.7 million, and the current expected funding for the same year is \$14.7 million. The explanation of variance is 'N/A', and current expected funding allocation for 2025–26 is \$1.4 million.

**Lauren KATHAGE:** So it was allocated \$14 million in –

**Jade BENHAM:** From the minister or the department.

**Georgina McCANN:** My understanding is that was the initial allocation, and this is an ongoing allocation for this year. So that was the set-up of the program, and this is just ongoing.

**Jade BENHAM:** So which specific projects were originally included under the 2024–25 allocation of that \$14.7 million? Do you have a list of councils or projects?

**Georgina McCANN:** We do have a list of projects. We can get that to you.

**Jade BENHAM:** Great. Thank you so much. Will any of these projects now not proceed due to that reduction?

**Georgina McCANN:** No.

**Jade BENHAM:** They are all still going to go ahead?

**Georgina McCANN:** Correct.

**Jade BENHAM:** This is the same questionnaire, page 90. Despite the Allan Labor government claiming continued support for the Get Active Kids voucher program through 2026–27, key evaluation findings remain hidden from public view, program delivery outcomes raise concern about effectiveness and questions remain about targeting equity and transparency. Why has \$11.8 million been allocated for 2025–26 but only \$8.5 million in 2026–27? Are you scaling back the program?

**Georgina McCANN:** No.

**Jade BENHAM:** Why the reduction?

**Ros SPENCE:** This \$15 million over two years has been allocated to the program, and that is not a scaling back of the program at all.

**Jade BENHAM:** What was that figure that you just gave then, sorry?

**Ros SPENCE:** \$15 million over two years.

**Jade BENHAM:** Over the two years?

**Ros SPENCE:** In this year's budget.

**Georgina McCANN:** Are you looking at the prior year's budget?

**Jade BENHAM:** We are looking at –

**The CHAIR:** Apologies, Ms Benham.

**Richard WELCH:** The questionnaire.

**Jade BENHAM:** Yes, the questionnaire.

**The CHAIR:** We are going to go to Mr Galea.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you, Chair. An important few lines of topic that were just discussed there. Indeed back in I think 2008 a school friend of mine actually sued the AFL because she was told she could not play once she turned 13.

**Jade BENHAM:** Me too.

**Michael GALEA:** You did too?

**Jade BENHAM:** Yes, I was that age. As soon as we got boobs we could not play.

**Michael GALEA:** Well, good on you too, Ms Benham.

**Jade BENHAM:** We could not play above under-12s.

**Michael GALEA:** It is trailblazers like yourself indeed and like Evelyn Rannstrom, who I went to school with, who were part of making that change. How wonderful to see where we are, but we have a long way to go. Thank God we are not in that situation anymore. Minister, I would actually also like to take you to the Get Active Kids program. I know there has been funding over several years, and indeed there is quite a bit of funding. Is it true that there is actually a funding increase in this budget for that program?

**Ros SPENCE:** There could be a funding increase.

**Michael GALEA:** In the current budget, that is.

**Georgina McCANN:** That is right. Well, it is consistent with the last funding allocation for the last round.

**Michael GALEA:** Consistent with the previous allocation, but it is still nevertheless an increase?

**Georgina McCANN:** Exactly.

**Ros SPENCE:** Yes, it is additional funding.

**Georgina McCANN:** It is new funding that we provided. That is exactly right.

**Michael GALEA:** It is good just to clarify for the committee; it is good to get that on the record. Thank you. Minister, can you talk to me a little bit about this program and why the government places such a high priority on it?

**Ros SPENCE:** I can talk to you a lot about this program, Mr Galea. This is a really important program, and it is a priority for the government because it addresses that really important issue of participation in sport and all of the flow-on benefits that come from that. We know that the vouchers are really important for kids, because it gives them an avenue to play sport when they might otherwise miss out because of the cost of participation being a barrier. There are more than 70 sports represented by registered activity providers, and that number grows to more than 90 if you include the reimbursement stream. Some of these sports are not cheap to play, especially when you factor in the cost of registration fees and equipment that you might need to change every season as your children continue to grow. We do not want cost to be a barrier that stops children finding a sport that could be their life passion or joining in a healthy activity with their friends. We know that there are many health and wellbeing benefits to participating in sport, but there are also the social benefits of being involved in a club and the lifelong lessons that sport can provide – like teamwork, respect and fairness – that all get grounded in that early participation.

These vouchers are really important for families as well. We know that parents sacrifice for their children, and not being able to comfortably afford to pay does not mean that they will sit by and let their child miss out. The Get Active Kids voucher program provides that targeted cost-of-living support for families who would otherwise reduce spending in other essential areas rather than see their kids miss out. I have spoken previously to this committee about my experience as a single parent and the really impossible predicament that you find yourself in when all of the utility bills arrive in the one week, the rent is due and the request for registration in sport comes in as well; you have got to make some really difficult decisions because you do not want to say no. So I know personally that this program could have an enormous benefit, having been in those circumstances.

The vouchers are a really useful tool for clubs as well to maintain and to expand their player base. Children missing out on access to sport is not just a negative for the kids, but it is also a negative for the clubs who miss out on building the next generation of athletes and keeping the club culture and community alive. Sporting clubs, as we know, are often that cornerstone of a community, especially in regional Victoria, but if you do not have the next generation coming up through the ranks clubs that would otherwise be very healthy and positive spaces can dwindle and collapse really quickly. So the Get Active Kids voucher program is helping kids, it is helping families and it is helping clubs by increasing participation, and that is why it is such a high priority for the government.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you, Minister. Still with the same budget reference for the Get Active Kids voucher program, I know that round 8 has now concluded. Are there any insights that you can provide to the committee on that round?

**Ros SPENCE:** I can, and I note the committee's interest at the last hearings in these insights as well, so thank you for following up, because we do learn a lot each time we have a round of the program.

If we look across the top 20 local government areas for reimbursements paid and true vouchers redeemed across round 8, one of the things we see is a really interesting mix of councils right across the state. The top LGAs include Hume, Melton, Wyndham, Frankston, Casey, Brimbank, Greater Geelong, Whittlesea, Cardinia, Ballarat, Merri-bek, Greater Dandenong, Mornington Peninsula, Yarra Ranges, Whitehorse, Manningham, Nillumbik, Maroondah, Greater Bendigo and Monash. Those 20 demonstrate that real mix of metropolitan, peri-urban and regional LGAs, and they are spread out right across Victoria, not just concentrated in one particular region. That is one of the ways that we know that the Get Active Kids voucher program is cutting through right across Victoria and is being accessed by families who need it right across a range of postcodes.

Another insight that we have is the sports that are commonly captured in the program. Across reimbursements and true vouchers, the most common sports in round 8 are basketball, swimming, cricket, dance, gymnastics, round-ball football, netball, tennis, athletics, AFL, Scouts and gym and fitness programs. The exact numbers vary, but this is just a bit of a snapshot view. This is a really important insight to have, because it lets us know that you are getting the timings of the round about right. You can see you have got a mix in there of summer, winter and year-round activities, and the timing of when you open and close a round is important because you want to make sure that everyone is able to be included and that no seasonal sports are being left out.

It is also valuable information for us to have as a government because it helps us get a snapshot of what sports young people are playing, which can then again of course help guide future funding initiatives and investment opportunities.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you, Minister. I am not surprised at all to hear basketball at the top of that list. It is absolutely booming in the south-east. He is not here at the moment, but I think we will be overtaking Mr McGowan's precious Ringwood area for top participation in basketball very soon if not already. If I can do a quick plug on local basketball in the south-east whilst I have got you here, that would be great.

Minister, obviously all of this interest, all of this activity, whether it is girls in high numbers in sport, whether it is in basketball or in other things that we have spoken about, all requires infrastructure. There is a very significant part of your portfolio too that goes into supporting these community clubs with their infrastructure needs. If I can ask you – budget paper 3, page 61 – I know that there is \$20 million allocated in this budget for the delivery of that community sport infrastructure: what sort of specific infrastructure are we talking about here?

**Ros SPENCE:** Thank you. We do have significant investment in infrastructure. Community sport infrastructure is really multifaceted. It can comprise a number of different things. The most straightforward and streamlined projects that we would invest in are things like small popular scoreboard upgrades. I know that the Chair, the Member for Laverton, knows all about this, because earlier this year she and I went out to Sunshine Heights Cricket Club, who received \$85,000 towards a new scoreboard, and they were absolutely thrilled about that, so a great investment. I know from clubs all around the state that scoreboard upgrades may be small projects but they have really big impacts and they are very popular.

We also have more complicated projects that we invest in, such as the Mildura sporting precinct, which I had the pleasure of visiting with the Member for Mildura a little over a year ago now. That project received \$10 million through the community sports infrastructure stimulus program and \$750,000 through the Regional Community Infrastructure Fund. Stage 2 works included the delivery of eight-lane turf and synthetic cricket practice nets, a second multi-use oval with centre wicket floodlighting to competition standards, four indoor squash courts, four outdoor acrylic netball courts with competition-standard floodlighting and additional seating. The venue is absolutely incredible and would be welcomed as a high-quality multifunctional sports hub in any city of the world.

So they are two examples of projects that run at the opposite end of the complexity spectrum, but we have projects occurring all throughout Victoria that fit within that range as well. Some examples in this budget include \$250,000 towards a lighting upgrade at Doreen United Soccer Club, \$70,000 towards a scoreboard at Heatherton reserve and up to \$200,000 towards the delivery of new floodlighting to Diamond 3 in Gilbert Park, Knoxfield, which the Member –



**Michael GALEA:** It is very exciting.

**Ros SPENCE:** Yes, and I know that you visited that recently. No doubt that club and that community are very happy about that investment.

**Michael GALEA:** They certainly are, so it was fantastic news that we got to share locally as well, Minister. The general manager of Basketball Victoria just emailed me as well. He is obviously watching too, so he has got a keen interest in this. He was very quick off the mark.

Minister, sticking with the community benefits of this infrastructure, the same budget paper 3, page 61, what are some of the other benefits broader to these specific clubs that this infrastructure can bring to communities?

**Ros SPENCE:** These upgrades to infrastructure programs are incredibly important. It is really important that we build fit-for-purpose facilities, and that is the first step of getting people involved in community sport. We know that many of the facilities throughout Victoria are decades old. They reflect a different set of design standards and priorities. We all know of the change rooms that consist of the narrow wooden benches and the communal shower facilities with cracked tiles. We all know clubs that fit that description. They are not welcoming to women and others.

**Michael GALEA:** They need work. Thank you, Minister.

**The CHAIR:** We have got Mr Puglielli.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you, Chair. Good evening. On budget paper 3, page 154, just on the output, Minister, can I get a confirmation: is the Preventing Violence Through Sport Grants program no longer in the state budget? And if it is not, can you tell us where clubs will receive that type of funding to address violence and its prevention through sport?

**Ros SPENCE:** Thank you for raising this. This is actually a program that I am really quite pleased that we were able to deliver; I was dealing with it when I was the Minister for Prevention of Family Violence. It still sits within that portfolio that provided the funding. Family Safety Victoria funded it, and it was delivered by Sport and Rec Victoria, so it is not in my purview to go into future funding for it. But what I will say is that it supported 12 partnerships between 34 organisations to undertake some primary prevention initiatives. That was over a set time period. I think there was initial funding provided for two years and then it was extended for another year. All of those projects that were being undertaken were being funded over a set period but they can most certainly continue delivering because what they have done is they have created the materials that go to the future information sharing.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Right. It sounds like there will be some follow-up questions for that minister potentially. On another matter, multicultural swimming programs play a really vital role in promoting water safety and inclusion for culturally and linguistically diverse communities, particularly children and families who may not have had previous access to swimming education. Particularly from the statistics, we know multicultural communities experience greater risks of drowning. Can I ask: what is being done about this, and what is being done to support our communities?

**Ros SPENCE:** Thank you. You are absolutely right: far too large a number of our multicultural communities are in our drowning figures, and that is not okay. One thing that we have done is the VICSWIM Summer Kidz program included those swim centres that were providing lessons to CALD communities, directly targeting them – I know that there was one where I am out in Hume – so that for those multicultural communities it is tailored to suit their experience and their background and encourage them to get involved. What we know is cost can be a barrier for anyone, so having these programs close to home for a low cost is really important. We also know that through the Get Active Kids voucher program swimming is one of the top sports that vouchers are received for, so it would be reasonable to presume, when you look at the areas that have the highest uptake, that there would be many CALD families represented there as well.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much, Mr Puglielli. Minister, 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.

I would like to thank all ministers and officials who have given evidence to the committee today, as well as Hansard, the committee secretariat and parliamentary attendants. I would also like to thank the hospitality, security and cleaning staff who have looked after all of us today.

The committee will resume its consideration of the 2025–26 budget estimates on Thursday 12 June at 8:30 am. I declare this hearing adjourned.

**Committee adjourned.**