

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the 2025–26 Budget Estimates

Melbourne – Thursday 12 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

Ingrid Stitt MLC, Minister for Multicultural Affairs; and

Dr Emma Cassar, Deputy Secretary, Social Policy and Intergovernmental Relations, and

Maya Ramakrishnan, Executive Director, Social Policy and Intergovernmental Relations, Department of Premier and Cabinet.

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 these hearings and anything you say 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 today 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 Multicultural Affairs the Honourable Ingrid Stitt, as well as officials from DPC. 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.

Ingrid STITT: Thank you, Chair. I begin by acknowledging the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet today, the lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation, and I pay my respects to elders past and present and to any Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people who are with us here today.

Visual presentation.

Ingrid STITT: I am pleased to appear before the committee as Minister for Multicultural Affairs. Victoria is one of the most culturally diverse places in the world. We proudly come from more than 300 ancestries, speak 290 languages and practice more than 200 faiths. Nearly half of all Victorians were born overseas themselves or have a parent who was born overseas. This is one of Victoria's greatest strengths, but we also know that newly arrived migrants can face complex and significant barriers to opportunity.

The portfolio supports Victoria's multicultural and multifaith communities by celebrating diverse traditions and fostering community connections. The portfolio also works to address racism and provides targeted supports to refugees and newly arrived migrants. It has been a particularly challenging time for many within our multicultural communities, as conflict overseas has a profound impact here in Victoria. That is why we have commissioned the respected George Lekakis AO to undertake a review of how we can ensure Victoria's systems and policies are set up to build bridges and celebrate the strength of our diversity. We also delivered the nation's first anti-racism strategy and the anti-vilification and social cohesion Bill, which protect more Victorians from hate and vilification.

The Allan Labor government will work with every member of our multicultural community to make sure that they belong here in Victoria. The Allan Labor government continues to invest in and support our diverse communities. Since 2015 our government has proudly invested more than \$670 million through the multicultural affairs portfolio to support our diverse communities. This is on average more than eight times the

investment than between 2011 and 2015, and in 2025–26 our investment of \$48.2 million is more than double the investment than when we came to government in 2014.

It has been a very busy year in the portfolio, with a number of significant achievements, including \$6.5 million in funding to support more than 500 multicultural festivals and events, \$8.5 million to support 41 community infrastructure projects and \$600,000 to support 24 multicultural media organisations. Further to this, our government has invested \$7.3 million to provide targeted support for Victorians of African heritage, and \$4 million has been invested to deliver Victoria's first anti-racism strategy.

Work continues on the delivery of our election commitments announced in 2022, including \$40 million for improved community facilities; \$12 million for community festivals, including \$600,000 to support 15 Sikh organisations to deliver langar events; \$9.8 million to build on the *Victorian African Communities Action Plan* and to support the ECCV, the Bachar Houli Foundation and museums across the state; \$6 million to deliver anti-vilification campaigns; \$1.5 million for media support grants; and \$500,000 to support the work of multifaith organisations.

Through the 2025–26 state budget we are continuing to build on our strong record of investment in our multicultural communities, with more than \$20 million in funding to support connection and belonging. This includes \$7.6 million to support the vital work of the Migrant Workers Centre, \$5.6 million to strengthen community infrastructure and community engagement, \$2.1 million to support multicultural seniors groups, \$3.6 million to deliver place-based, culturally competent settlement supports through trusted multicultural organisations and \$1.25 million to support the completion of Australia's first Vietnamese museum in Sunshine.

We are proud of our diversity, and our government will continue to support our multicultural communities to thrive. Thank you very much, Chair, and I am looking forward to answering questions from the committee.

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

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

Ingrid STITT: Hello.

Jade BENHAM: Minister, Sheik Abu Hamza, also known as Samir Mohtadi, is the leader of an organisation called My Centre. Mr Mohtadi is on the record saying some very ugly things, that I am not going to repeat here, regarding the Jewish Australian community. These have been well reported on Channel 9 and in the *Australian*. He is also on the record promoting things that are completely unacceptable regarding the treatment of women, which I hope you are across. Minister, is this acceptable, and is his organisation, which promotes these views, in receipt of any support this financial year, or any other financial years, from your government?

Ingrid STITT: Thank you for that question. Of course the government will always stand for respect in our community, and that includes our community leaders. That goes without saying that we expect that even if people have different views, that they communicate them and they articulate them in a way that respects others and also is mindful of the legislative framework in place in Victoria. We do deliver in the portfolio a significant number of grants. We have a very large festival and events grant stream and an equally significant infrastructure program; 260 multicultural and multifaith communities have received funding so far.

Jade BENHAM: How much of that has My Centre received?

Ingrid STITT: Any organisation that receives grants is required to – you know, their application must be in line with the funding grant guidelines associated with that particular grant stream, and there are robust grant assessment processes that are in place.

Jade BENHAM: Has My Centre or AMF received any funding in past financial years or are they this financial year? If you do not have those details, can we get some details on notice, please?

Ingrid STITT: I would be happy to take that aspect of your question on notice and check with my department as to whether that particular organisation has received funding, but what I want to be very clear about is that we expect all our organisations that receive grants through the multicultural affairs portfolio to acquit their responsibilities in accordance with the agreement they have with the department. We also expect

any organisation that receives grants to spend them appropriately in accordance with the guidelines of that particular grant.

Jade BENHAM: If it appears that these organisations that Mr Mohtadi is associated with, AMF or My Centre – will you review this funding?

Ingrid STITT: I have agreed to take it on notice. I do not have the detailed information in front of me –

Jade BENHAM: Okay.

Ingrid STITT: today, Ms Benham, about exactly the names of each organisation that has received funding. We do fund a large number each year. But I am very happy to take that on notice and follow up with the committee.

Jade BENHAM: Could you also rule out funding being provided to organisations that have engaged in conduct that would be in breach of anti-vilification provisions?

Ingrid STITT: Everybody in Victoria has a responsibility to comply with the law, and community organisations are no different to that. One measure that the government has taken around strengthening social cohesion which I announced with the Premier a few months ago was that we would be introducing a social cohesion pledge that would form part of the grant application process.

Jade BENHAM: Great. Thank you, Minister.

Ingrid STITT: And this is in order –

Jade BENHAM: I am just going to move on to the next question, in the interests of time. In November 2022 Labor MPs the Honourable Enver Erdogan, Iwan Walters and Kathleen Matthews-Ward announced that AMF, in partnership with MyCentre support services, would receive \$250,000. Can you confirm if this funding has been remitted, and could the outcome report please be made available?

Ingrid STITT: As I have already indicated, I have taken on notice already your question around direct funding allocation to that particular organisation, and I will provide that back to the committee in accordance with PAEC's requirements. But again, as I was in the process of saying, we have asked George Lekakis AO to review our multicultural institutions and frameworks. That is in recognition of the fact that the last 20 months or so have been a particularly difficult time for the community, and there has been a lot of conflict overseas that has had an impact on the Victorian community. When the Premier and I announced that one of our measures that we would be taking would be to introduce this social cohesion pledge as part of all our grant applications in the multicultural affairs portfolio, I also asked George Lekakis to consult with key community stakeholders as part of the broader review that he is doing.

Jade BENHAM: Are you concerned about the association with Mr Mohtadi, and that his comments, which have been well publicised, are in breach of anti-vilification laws? You have clearly done a bit of work in this area. Are you concerned about that?

Ingrid STITT: What I would say is that our government takes these issues extremely seriously. It is why we introduced that legislation into the Parliament. It is why we made the commitment to the whole Victorian community that we would strengthen our anti-vilification laws so that it is abundantly clear, not just in our public comments as leaders but in the legislative framework, that hate speech is not appropriate, that there is no place in Victoria for division and hate speech. And we will be –

Jade BENHAM: This is someone who uses some really ugly language, and he has regular ministerial visits. Will the government be reviewing funding for MyCentre and associated organisations in the future?

Ingrid STITT: I have already taken that aspect of your question on notice.

Jade BENHAM: Can you give the Victorian taxpayer a guarantee that taxpayers will not be funding someone with well-publicised hateful views?

Ingrid STITT: What I have been in the process of explaining to the committee is the strengthening of these requirements that our government and I as minister have taken to make sure that anybody, any organisation in receipt of government funding, is appropriately not only aware of what the law is but that their application acquits each of the requirements of that particular grant stream and that they are also complying with what we will be introducing very soon in the form of a pledge around social cohesion.

Jade BENHAM: Surely a breach of anti-vilification laws is a breach and does not meet compliance with funding streams.

Ingrid STITT: I think we are in heated agreement about the issue, Ms Benham, and that is that there is no place in Victoria for anyone engaging in that kind of hate speech. That is why our government has been particularly strong on this, including changing the law.

Jade BENHAM: He said that rape and beating in the household was okay in –

The CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Benham. We are going to go to Mr Hilakari.

Mathew HILAKARI: Thank you, Minister, and thank you, officials, for your attendance this morning. I am going to take us to the Migrant Workers Centre. As you know, Minister, and as you have been an advocate for supporting our vulnerable workers, it is a very important matter, and people in multicultural communities are prone to being exploited in a way that maybe sometimes others are not. Minister, I am hoping you can talk through what the work of the Migrant Workers Centre is and how it supports some of our most vulnerable communities in making sure they are paid and respected properly at their workplaces.

Ingrid STITT: Thank you very much, Mr Hilakari. I know this is an important issue for your community as well, because you have got a lot of very diverse parts of your community who would I am sure avail themselves of services like this. The budget provides significant funding for the Migrant Workers Centre over a four-year period. This is a service that is incredibly important. We know that employment is a really key driver of migration here in Australia; it accounted for about half the nation's population growth in 2023, and Victoria attracted about 29 per cent of that increase. That is a good story for the economy, but it is also the fact that migrant workers contribute about \$1 billion to the Victorian economy every year. It is also a good thing for our rich and diverse multicultural communities – when people come here to live, to work, we are all the beneficiaries of that. They bring their vibrant cultures and it makes our community, I would argue, stronger. However, we also know that migrant workers can face some unique challenges. For instance, they are more vulnerable to employment or wage discrimination, and recent migrants are almost twice as likely as long-term residents to be underpaid or unpaid, and they have a higher rate of occupational injuries and work-related disease. This has real downstream impacts on our society, whether that is through increased healthcare costs or reduced productivity, and it is why the Allan Labor government has continued to fund this really important and tailored service so that migrant workers are able to not only properly understand their rights and the employment arrangements here in Australia, but so that they can have somewhere to go to get that support when they are exploited or mistreated.

The Migrant Workers Centre is Australia's first government-funded organisation to respond to exploitation, mistreatment and workplace issues faced by migrant workers and also international students – you would all be aware, I am sure, of the importance of the international student population here in our state. Since 2018 the Labor government has provided over \$9 million in funding to the Migrant Workers Centre to provide that casework service and that community education and research and advocacy to improve conditions for migrant workers here in Victoria. This budget provides a further \$7.6 million over four years so that the Migrant Workers Centre can continue that work.

I will give you a few examples of the types of things that the centre has been able to achieve, and they have done a power of work across our migrant communities: they have recovered over \$2 million in unpaid wages and entitlements since they established in 2018, so that is an amazing effort; they have supported individual migrant workers in 640 cases since July 2021; they have provided casework in 58 different languages, which is a mighty effort; they have educated nearly 8000 participants on workplace rights; and they have undertaken work rights and support outreach events attended by over 5000 people. This is an organisation that knows how to get in and connect with members of our diverse communities, people who are not always easy to find and communicate with because they are not necessarily connected to mainstream communication networks and

media. Part of the work they do is through the bicultural work rights ambassadors program, many of whom I have had the pleasure of meeting – amazing people. As I have said, we know that refugee and migrant communities can face particularly unique challenges when settling in Victoria, and those bicultural work rights ambassadors help train and support migrant leaders in Victoria. It is really about building a sustainable model so that it is something that the community can build on in each part of our diverse state.

So far there are more than 60 multicultural community leaders that have been trained and have delivered workplace rights and safety information in more than 40 languages. Recently the Migrant Workers Centre were also able to attain status as a community legal centre, and that is important because that means that they do not have to refer cases on to other community legal centres. They are able to help support people right throughout their particular issue, from when they first may come in contact with a community leader in their part of the state, or if they connect directly with the Migrant Workers Centre they will be able to see their case right through. So in recognition of that, there is funding in the budget that helps the Migrant Workers Centre deliver that direct legal service. We obviously recognise that it is a really positive impact not just for those individual workers but for the whole community in undertaking this sort of support, and the Migrant Workers Centre really has shown what is possible when there is a tailored service available to meet the needs of diverse Victorians.

Mathew HILAKARI: And twice as likely to be under- or unpaid. That is why that work is so important and vital and the measure of sending that across the whole community into all businesses that it is important to pay people properly – it is not just their legal obligation but it is important to do so. Minister, I might take you to the Multicultural Community Infrastructure Fund. It is referenced on page 80 of budget paper 3. I am hoping that you could talk to me about how this supports the community to celebrate their cultural heritage and traditions, and I know how important these centres are across the community, because I meet many communities who are interested in seeing their community have a place to call home. Particularly I would like to understand about the Vietnamese Museum Australia as well, which is I think a really great thing, particularly in the western suburbs.

Ingrid STITT: Thank you. And this is a really wonderful part of the work in the multicultural affairs portfolio, being able to continue our work to support Victoria's multicultural and multifaith communities to ensure that they not only belong but have got places that they can gather as a community and practise their tradition and their cultures. So the multicultural affairs portfolio has provided a range of grant programs since 2014. Over 4300 organisations have been supported through these programs, and that represents more than 260 multicultural and multifaith communities across Victoria. That is something that we ought to celebrate, I think. It includes our Multicultural Community Infrastructure Fund, which is extremely popular, which recognises having that safe, accessible and culturally appropriate –

Mathew HILAKARI: We could fill that line item just from Point Cook many times over.

Ingrid STITT: Yes, indeed.

Mathew HILAKARI: I am saying we could. We could easily if given the chance. It is a shout-out to the department – let them know.

Ingrid STITT: This allows organisations to both construct new facilities but also to upgrade existing facilities. And the 2025–26 state budget has an additional investment of \$5 million over two years to support building and upgrading community infrastructure. This investment obviously will provide that opportunity for people to come together, but it is not just about that, it is about critical services and support. I know that you know from your community, Mr Hilakari, that so many communities are giving back to others. There are a lot of food banks that go on, food relief centres, people supporting those in need in the community, and this gives them a base from which to do that.

In the time that I have got left I can quickly touch on the Vietnamese museum. I know you are very interested in that as well. So we have provided additional funding of \$1.25 million in this budget, which brings our total contribution from the Victorian government to almost \$10 million. And we have partnered with the Commonwealth in supporting this project. The Vietnamese story of migration – the refugees that arrived here in Australia 50 years ago this year make an incredible contribution to our community, and they really are the story of who we are as Victorians. The Chair and my good friend Ms Connolly and I are really excited about that project in Sunshine.

The CHAIR: I am very excited about that one. We are going to go to Mr Puglielli.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you, Chair. Good morning. I am at budget paper 3, page 168, the output summary. Could I ask, Minister, will any of the funding for the Victorian African communities plan be distributed to Africause in order to co-design a cross-cultural program to improve relationships with the Footscray police force?

Ingrid STITT: Thank you for that question. Obviously we have significant investment and work we do with those in Victoria of African heritage, and one of the key initiatives is the *Victorian African Communities Action Plan*, and I am happy to take you to those details. In terms of the recent events in Footscray, I know it has been incredibly upsetting for many in the community and particularly for the loved ones of Mr Ahmed. He was a Somali man living with significant issues. That is a matter that is being investigated at a number of levels, so I am not going to go to the specifics of that incident, but I do want to express my deep condolences to the whole community, because I know that it has really impacted them. I have had the opportunity to meet with a number of community leaders from the Victorian Somali community to hear directly from them about what supports the government can provide to make sure, particularly for people who are experiencing homelessness or mental health issues or AOD challenges, that we have got the tailored supports that we need which are culturally appropriate and safe. I have had that initial meeting with a number of community leaders from the Somali Victorian community.

I know that the Victorian Multicultural Commission have also been working closely with community leaders in Footscray following those events. There are a large number of services already in operation in the Footscray area through a range of different community organisations. We have got a number of important public mental health services as well. But what I am keen to ensure is that whatever additional supports we might look to provide, they are responding directly to what the community leaders are telling us as a government they need.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you.

Ingrid STITT: And they know their communities best, so I am very committed to listening carefully to what they are asking for and seeing how we can ensure that our services are responding directly to those concerns.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, Minister and Mr Puglielli. Minister and officials, thank you 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 now take a break before beginning its consideration of the creative industries portfolio at 12:30 pm. I declare this hearing adjourned.

Witnesses withdrew.