

CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into budget estimates 2005–06

Melbourne — 13 May 2005

Members

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Witnesses

Mr J. Thwaites, Minister for Victorian Communities;

Mr Y. Blacher, secretary;

Dr C. Lane, executive director, community strengthening and volunteering; and

Mr S. Gregory, chief finance officer, Department for Victorian Communities.

The CHAIR — Good morning. I declare open the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee hearing on the budget estimates for the portfolio of Victorian communities. I welcome the Honourable John Thwaites, Minister for Victorian Communities; Mr Yehudi Blacher, secretary of the department; Dr Charles Lane, executive director, community, strengthening and volunteering; and Mr Stephen Gregory, chief executive officer from the Department for Victorian Communities; departmental officers, members of the public and the media. In accordance with the guidelines for public hearings I remind members of the public that they cannot participate in the committee's proceedings. Only officers of the PAEC secretariat are to approach PAEC members. Departmental officers, as requested by the minister or his chief of staff, can approach the table during the hearing. Members of the media are also requested to observe the guidelines for filming or recording proceedings in the Legislative Council Committee room.

All evidence taken by the committee is taken under the provisions of the Parliamentary Committees Act and is protected from judicial review. However, any comments made outside the precincts of the hearing are not protected by parliamentary privilege. All evidence given today is being recorded, and witnesses will be provided with proof versions of the transcript. Minister, you now have the opportunity to make a presentation for up to 10 minutes on this portfolio.

Overheads shown.

Mr THWAITES — Thank you, Chair, and to the committee. I will start by referring to the social policy statement *A Fairer Victoria*, which was released just before the state budget. It encapsulates very much the focus for the government and particularly the Department for Victorian Communities. It is a plan to improve the quality of life for Victorians and to address disadvantage. It is a \$788 million action plan over the next four years which will improve access to universal services, reduce barriers to opportunity, strengthen assistance for disadvantaged groups and places and make it easier to work with government.

The Department for Victorian Communities has a key role to play. First, in community strengthening: we note that all the research is indicating that where government can work in partnership with communities and local government you get better results in terms of health — people live longer and are healthier; you get better results in terms of prosperity — those communities actually do better and are wealthier; and you achieve better results in terms of social outcomes like the number of kids who stay on at school or do not get into trouble with police. This stuff is sometimes seen as theoretical, but it is actually very practical. It does make a big difference.

In terms of that community strengthening, strong communities are active, where lots of things are going on and where they generate opportunities to participate and volunteer and provide support networks. It is interesting if you look across the state, you see there are quite significant differences in the state in the level of community strength, volunteering and the level of involvement. In those areas where you have greater involvement, you get better outcomes. There is clear research to back that up: in terms of health benefits, it is clear through National Heart Foundation of Australia research; and outcomes are also clear through statistics on school retention rates and crime rates. We know that crime has actually decreased in neighbourhood renewal areas where we have that community strengthening — areas like Shepparton. There was a report I saw recently where the neighbourhood renewal project led to a significant reduction in crime in that area. We are seeing crime rates come down across the state, which is great — Victoria is now a safer place to be, but we are seeing it particularly in some of the neighbourhood renewal areas.

I now turn to the Community Support Fund, which I have responsibility for. This fund has some ongoing achievements. I will refer a little to the way it operates. There is a Community Advisory Council headed by Peter Laver, who is very helpful in advising and recommending on the Community Support Fund. Since September there have been some 98 Victorian community support grants announced totalling some \$17 million. I should say of course that there is far more expenditure than that out of the Community Support Fund because announcements have been made prior to September. In that period there is a greater expenditure. It funds a range of projects around the state, and a number of them were announced a year or two years ago and have now been spent.

There is a very broad distribution of funds across Victoria to address disadvantage in a variety of ways such as boosting skills and employment opportunities, developing community facilities and community action planning. One of the interesting things is that in some areas there have not been as many applications as others. We need to work with those areas to support the communities to get the applications in. Other areas are very active. Generally the country areas are probably more active. They have all projects waiting to be supported. Some areas in the

western suburbs of Melbourne have not been as forthcoming as we would have liked in putting up projects. We are wanting to support that.

Some of the other community strengthening initiatives that have been announced since I was last before the committee are the Volunteering Community Enterprise strategy — \$21 million out of the Community Support Fund. That is a very important strategy. As the government we support volunteering, and I know when the Chair was minister she was a strong supporter of volunteering. There is a myth that volunteering is on the decline — that is untrue, as the Chair would know, and I think when she was minister a research report was carried out which indicated in fact that on the whole volunteering is increasing, although it is changing in its style. This strategy is a partnership with the Municipal Association of Victoria. We are working with it and volunteer resource centres to try it in areas where there are not volunteers to provide more support to encourage volunteers. If you look around the state, there are some very strong volunteer resource centres. Some councils are very supportive of volunteering, but we want to identify where there are gaps and provide the support for volunteering in those areas.

Another part of our strategy is the Volunteering Small Grants project. Small groups can get up to \$5000 for a piece of equipment or project that will attract new people to be volunteers. We want to bring in people who have not been volunteers, such as people from different ethnic groups, to come in and be part of that volunteering effort. That has been tremendously popular. There have been hundreds of applications. We have disbursed around \$1 million.

We are also supporting community enterprise, which is all about business opportunities which are run by local communities, and we have a community building initiative which is going to be initiated for local communities to be supported in strengthening their local community. I want to emphasise that as a department, the Department for Victorian Communities is changing the way it works with communities to be much more locally based. Local teams are being placed around the state coordinating between the different aspects of the department — sport and recreation, community strengthening, women's affairs, indigenous affairs — all of those areas, rather than being seen as separate silos, are coming together with local teams who can do everything. We are trying to do that through the grants process as well.

Finally, I would indicate the early results are promising. We did a community strength indicator report late last year which shows that since 2001 more Victorians feel safer on the streets after dark, feel there are opportunities to have a real say on important issues and feel they are valued by society. With the last slide I will not go into any detail, but there is funding in the budget for births, deaths and marriages records, for which I am also responsible, for the prevention of identity fraud.

The CHAIR — That clocked in at exactly 10 minutes. Thank you, Minister. My question goes to the Victorian electronic records strategy. I note there is funding for the electronic grants management system sustaining the adoption process across the Victorian government. Could you give us an update on the progress of initiatives over the last 12 months and projected?

Mr THWAITES — This is a strategy the department is certainly very proud of, because we are probably leading the world in it. I think it is one that all parties support. This is a program to keep our records as government in a form that is readable into the future. I never thought of it until I got into this portfolio, but if you think of the changing technology, that is a huge problem. For hundreds of years we recorded everything in books, and that is great because you can just go to the shelf and get everything out of the book. But any of us who have been through the various stages of the computer revolution will remember it started off with those punch cards, then tapes, then floppy disks and hard disks and hard drives. You cannot actually read what was on the floppy disks any more. This is a huge gap in government records. The VERS system aims to put all government information onto an electronic record that is going to be usable and readable into the future. As the Chair indicated, there is a further \$4.1 million in the budget for continuing the adoption of this through the government. We are doing it department by department. It is a program that the rest of Australia and the rest of the world will want to support.

Mr FORWOOD — Minister, last year you provided the committee in your slide show with a very useful slide which divided the Community Support Fund revised estimates for 2003–04 into its various components and put dollar figures beside them. It would be very useful if you could provide the same slide with the modifications that have obviously occurred throughout the year for the financial year 2004–05. This was part of your display last year, and it was particularly useful, which showed total payments from the Community Support Fund and where they went. If you could do that again, that would be useful for us. If you look at the web site 'Grants A–Z', it shows that in the Victorian community's part of the department there are four grant programs: community support,

building community infrastructure, planning, strengthening communities and the volunteer small grants programs. I wonder if you could provide to the committee the amounts that each recipient has received under those grants in the year that is relevant.

Mr THWAITES — I can take that on board. We do not have that in a form here. In broad terms I have indicated it is around \$1 million; the infrastructure grants are grants for buildings; the planning grants are the small grants that you have for doing the planning work; and the community strengthening grants are generally staffing to do with community strengthening projects.

Ms ROMANES — Minister, in budget paper 3, page 239, under the community strengthening output the table indicates that 200 to 250 volunteering small grants are forecast to be approved in 2005-06. Could you please provide the committee with information on the take-up of these grants to date, some information as to what these grants are typically used for and what the key performance indicators are?

Mr THWAITES — These small grants are part of our volunteering strategy which I referred to earlier. They are aimed at smaller groups to encourage new people to be volunteers. They are up to \$5000. The forms for them have been simplified so that they are very simple — basically a back and front form that can be easily filled out. There have been over 270 grants already approved, in fact I think around 300 grants are now approved, and around \$1 million in total. The average grant size is around \$3000 and they are for an enormous range of activities and equipment. An example, since you have asked, is the Indian Association at Roxburgh Park, which has had some computers installed at its community centre to extend the skill of volunteers, particularly to enable them to go out and attract new volunteers from the various communities in that area. Another interesting one is at RMIT which has the radio station with the student youth network, SYN FM — —

Mr FORWOOD — SYN?

The CHAIR — Do not tell me you have not heard of it!

Mr THWAITES — It is for the under-60s! That network plans to recruit young people to get into radio and new people to volunteer, so we have provided some support there. It is a great program and there has been a lot of interest in it from culturally and linguistically diverse groups and from other community groups wanting to link in with other CALD groups, so it is a really good cross-cultural program.

Mr CLARK — Minister, I want to refer you to the department's answer to the committee's questionnaire, in particular the answer to question 6.1 relating to staffing. The figures you have given us show that for the Department for Victorian Communities the actual staffing as at June 2004 was 606 EFT, ongoing EFT 468, then expected at the end of the current financial year, 792.8 total equivalent full-time staff of whom 575.1 are ongoing. My question is: Can you tell us now, or take on notice, what output areas these additional staff are going into, or have gone into, and what on earth will all these extra staff be doing?

Mr THWAITES — I think the principal increase is the Commonwealth Games, basically. There is a ratcheting up in the lead-up to the Commonwealth Games and of course once the games finish that will not be necessary. But I think that is the principal factor there. There are also some interdepartmental transfers — for example, the Office of Senior Victorians has come across from DHS and neighbourhood houses has come across from DHS. Some new initiatives were announced in 2004-05, like the skilled migration strategy, work force participation, language services strategy, youth@central, and the other area of course was veterans affairs which is a new initiative for which the Premier is the minister responsible but that has been placed in the Department for Victorian Communities. We place a very high value on veterans and we are providing support for that area.

Mr CLARK — Even after the games, as at 30 June 2006 you are expecting to have 616.1 ongoing EFT staff compared with 468 ongoing EFT staff as at 30 June 2004, so that does not seem to be explained by the Commonwealth Games.

Mr THWAITES — I do not think that figure is right for June 2004.

Mr CLARK — Perhaps you could check the answer that you gave to the committee. This is the column in the table at the bottom of page 10 of your pdf file, ongoing EFT.

Mr THWAITES — In that 606 — —

Mr CLARK — It is 606 total EFT, 468 ongoing EFT in the first column after classification. And then 626.1 ongoing EFT in the corresponding table for June 2006.

Mr THWAITES — So you are comparing 2004 to 2006?

Mr CLARK — Correct, and I am looking at only ongoing EFT to discount those you might have taken on fixed term or casual for the Commonwealth Games.

Mr THWAITES — I think I indicated that there were a number of those initiatives going forward — amongst them the Office of Senior Victorians, neighbourhood houses and veterans affairs, so there are a number of new initiatives there.

Mr CLARK — Perhaps if you would not mind getting back to us with an explanation of which areas those staff are going to.

Mr THWAITES — I think I have explained it.

Mr CLARK — But I would be interested to have the numbers for each area rather than just a generic description.

Mr THWAITES — That is not what you asked for. You asked for an explanation, and I have given you an explanation.

Mr FORWOOD — Let us be explicit; could we please have the numbers?

Mr CLARK — Chair, can I ask for clarification, please?

The CHAIR — The minister has just answered.

Mr FORWOOD — No, he has not.

The CHAIR — He did. He was quite clear. I understood perfectly, and if you — —

Mr FORWOOD — If you do not want information to come out here — —

The CHAIR — If you want his answer reaffirmed, he can do it, if you need that reaffirmed.

Mr THWAITES — There is another explanation, too.

Mr FORWOOD — Thank you.

Mr THWAITES — An additional one, which is in the 2004 figures. The question you asked did not include vacancies, whereas this includes vacancies, so that actually makes quite a difference to it. I think that answers your question.

Mr RICH-PHILLIPS — Could I ask a supplementary question on the minister's answer?

Mr FORWOOD — Yes, of course.

The CHAIR — The supplementary in relation to the clarification of numbers in relation to page 10?

Mr RICH-PHILLIPS — Clarification of the reference to the Commonwealth Games. Does that include Melbourne 2006 or only the Office of Commonwealth Games Coordination?

Mr FORWOOD — How many people have been employed and will be employed in that particular part of the department?

Mr THWAITES — You asked a question arising out of the questionnaire; that is not a question in the questionnaire. The questionnaire has not sought to break down every area of the department and every employee. Now what you are doing is trying to rewrite your questionnaire. I understand that. You actually asked the question on an explanation as to the difference between the 2004 figures and the 2006. I have given you a very full explanation, which is that there are some new programs, and I have identified those. There are some areas like

Commonwealth Games. I have also indicated that in your questionnaire, in 2004 it did not include vacancies and it does include vacancies. So when you put all that together with the new initiatives — and I think that also in my initial summary I indicated that we had new initiatives in births, deaths and marriages — that explains the difference.

Mr CLARK — I think when you check the transcript you will see that I actually asked for a breakdown.

Mr FORWOOD — We want a breakdown.

Mr CLARK — If you don't want to provide it, that's your business, but don't pretend you did not understand the question.

The CHAIR — Thank you. Mr Somyurek.

Mr FORWOOD — What are you hiding? That is the issue.

Mr SOMYUREK — Minister, community strengthening is obviously a key theme running through your presentation earlier this morning. I also noticed in your presentation you canvassed the Victorian community support grants. Could you advise the committee how this grants program contributes to community strengthening?

Mr THWAITES — I am happy to do that. The Community Support Fund has a key goal to strengthen communities, and the way we do that is to divide up the Community Support Fund essentially into three basic programs. The first is planning, where we seek to provide support to local groups to plan for better community results in their local community. The second is strengthening communities, and this is all about developing skills in the community, such as leadership skills. We see good results when people are able to support each other and we see good results in terms of local activity, and finally, building community infrastructure — that is, actual physical infrastructure. We are building community centres around the state. I think we announced the funds for Wangaratta. Throughout the state we are significantly investing in new community infrastructure. In Mornington there is the Bentons Square development. It is the state government working with local council and local groups on the projects that are going to make their community better. I think it is working. That is one of the reasons we are seeing better community spirit across the state. We are seeing lower crime rates and generally people are very satisfied with the way this is going.

Mr FORWOOD — On a quick supplementary question, I think your work on community strengthening is excellent. Can you explain to the committee why the budget this year is half what it was last year?

Mr THWAITES — I can. I asked the same question. That budget is not the amount we are spending. It is the difference between the amount coming into the Community Support Fund and the amount going out. It is not the amount going out, which is the total expenditure. It is the difference between the amount of revenue from gaming machines and the amount that is spent. This year essentially the amount that is coming in is comparably less, but the total amount we are spending is the same so the gap is smaller.

Mr FORWOOD — Thank you for the explanation, which I think is plausible. Should not the output group though have the total amount of expenditure in the output group?

Mr THWAITES — No, because if you look at the bottom line of the budget, the output to the budget, the difference is between the amount of revenue and expenditure, so the output effect on the budget is that difference.

Mr FORWOOD — I will take that up with the Minister for Finance and the Treasurer, but I am sure —

Mr THWAITES — We report in the department's annual report on the actual expenditure. That is all produced in the annual report.

Mr FORWOOD — Can you tell the committee what the total amount to be spent on community strengthening is?

Mr THWAITES — What you are looking at is a budget allocation, which is \$10 million. That is the difference between the amount coming in and the amount going out.

Mr GREGORY — The difference between revenue and expenditure into the CSF is about \$3.5 million dollars within that \$10 million. The rest is appropriation. You have about a \$3.5 million difference between the revenue coming in to the fund and expenditure out. Expenditure is about \$105 million for 2005-06. The rest is appropriation in relation to the broad things that we have included in all appropriations.

Mr FORWOOD — Does this apply to the other output groups as well?

Mr THWAITES — No, because they are straight out of the budget. The difference with the Community Support Fund is that it is not straight out of the budget. You have the Community Support Fund where the money is coming via the gaming machines in the Community Support Fund. This is a special case. It is an accounting measure that needs to be reported on in the budget to keep the true budget indication and the effect of the CSF.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for the explanation.

Mr RICH-PHILLIPS — I would like to ask you about the operating statement for the department on page 133 of BP 4 and your departmental submission to the committee on page 11.

Mr THWAITES — The questionnaire?

Mr RICH-PHILLIPS — Yes.

Mr THWAITES — Page 11 deals with employment.

Mr RICH-PHILLIPS — Your questionnaire shows that employment as at 30 June 2005 will be 792.8 EFT falling to 765.8 at the end of next year. This is roughly a decline of 30 staff, but the operating statement shows your employee benefits will increase by roughly \$5 million over the same period. This is roughly a 10 per cent increase. Can you explain why with a falling level of staff you have a 10 per cent growth in your employment costs — \$5 million — and can you also break down —

Mr THWAITES — It is not 10 per cent.

Mr RICH-PHILLIPS — It is \$48.8 million to \$53.3 million. Can you also break down the executive and non-executive staff where those funds will go?

Mr THWAITES — The issue there is that the staff you will see there which is reduced is at the end of the year. It does not mean that throughout the whole year you have that lower number of staff. With the Commonwealth Games they will be going off towards the end of the year. But if you work out the arithmetic, you have worked it out as though those people were at the start of the year.

Mr RICH-PHILLIPS — In terms of that increase of \$5 million as far in the breakdown of executive versus non-executive staff goes, are you able to provide that on notice?

Mr THWAITES — We are not expecting any particular increase in executive costs. The increase is just the general entitlements for people who have superannuation, other entitlements throughout enterprise bargains and other agreements over time.

The CHAIR — That is clear on the operating statement.

Mr FORWOOD — I would like to go back to the previous question —

The CHAIR — You can ask the previous question when it is your turn.

Ms GREEN — On page 239 of budget paper 3, I refer the minister to the community strengthening output group. I am interested whether you could give us an example of any individual initiatives that the department has taken under this output group to build stronger communities?

Mr THWAITES — Yes, I can. There are the 10 community building demonstration projects around the state. I have visited a number of them. As I understand it, they are involved in more than 400 separate activities. A lot of them are about small initiatives. Others are quite large initiatives — for example, in Maribyrnong the Doggies to Highpoint project is a great project which is auspiced by Mission Australia. It has done a whole lot of practical things. One practical thing was helping people from core communities to understand the *Melway* and to

read it. This is a practical thing. The residents of 135 Gordon Street — which has been quite an issue — have put together a book of at-home stories and recipes by those residents. It has established a residents newsletter for the high-rise at 127 Gordon Street and set up a festival, the Cool Cultural Kids Festival, which was held last November.

In other community building projects, in the Pyrenees, for example, they have been behind some major upgrades of the Snake Valley and Raglan hall. It has been behind a farmers market which has been set up at Beaufort. They have done community action plans with community members through a whole group of towns in the Pyrenees. In Shepparton there have been some great projects. There is the Young People Building Our Community projects in a number of neighbourhoods, in Mooroopna North and South Shepparton, and that has achieved a really good partnership between young people, schools and the local community. I could go on all day, which I will not do.

The CHAIR — Thank you.

Mr THWAITES — There are some fantastic projects all around the state and the people are very proud of them.

Mr BAXTER — The Premier, when he appeared before the committee on Tuesday in his capacity as minister responsible for veterans affairs, indicated that the Community Support Fund is to be hypothecated by a certain percentage of the veterans fund. Is it proposed to hypothecate the CSF for any other particular activities?

Mr THWAITES — I think the veterans' hypothecation is one day. Essentially Anzac Day is hypothecated for veterans. Out of the total funds that come in there, there are hypothecations into health and drugs, but there are not additional ones that the government has planned at this stage.

Mr MERLINO — Minister, I refer you to page 239 of budget paper 3 and the community strengthening outputs. Can you explain to the committee how communities that are undertaking community strengthening activities are actually supported?

Mr THWAITES — Yes, I can. One of the key things that we as a government can do is provide support to communities who are actively involved in community strengthening. Part of that is about skills and information for those communities. We are developing and have developed a community building web site — that is, www.communitybuilding.vic.gov.au. That provides a wealth of information for local communities with case studies and lessons on what they can do to be involved in community building. We have also had some workshops, and overall more than 1000 people have attended workshops on community building around the state, and we have a further 18 workshops that are being held in the first half of 2005. One of the critical things is leadership and mentoring support. In the recent social policy statement we provided additional funds for mentoring for young people. Similarly we are wanting to support mentoring for community building and community development — for example, there is a pilot project in Shepparton where we are mentoring young people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and providing some leadership skills for them. We are overall supporting our community building resource service, which as well as the web site has a clearinghouse library at RMIT and leadership and mentoring skills attached to it. It is really all about providing some very practical advice for local communities that are involved in community building.

Mr FORWOOD — Page 1, budget paper 3, 'chapter 2, third paragraph, first sentence:

The cost measure for each output is the total output cost and includes state appropriation revenue, as well as funding from other sources.

I refer you to your previous answer. Can you tell me why the output group should not read \$105 million?

Mr THWAITES — Why? Because that is the appropriate budget allocation is the difference between the revenue and the expenditure.

Mr FORWOOD — Did you read the sentence?

Mr THWAITES — Yes, I have read it, but — —

Mr FORWOOD — But that is not what it says, is it? It says the 'total output cost'.

Mr THWAITES — Yes, I can read.

Mr FORWOOD — But you do not understand though, do you?

Mr THWAITES — I am sure you have a much greater understanding than the Department of Treasury and Finance. Maybe you could argue it out with them. This is certainly on my advice the appropriate way to record it in the budget papers, but you may have a new and innovative approach and perhaps you might suggest that.

Mr FORWOOD — No, I am just doing what you say you do in your budget papers.

Mr THWAITES — The advice I have is that the disclosure has been like this since the fund was established when you were a member of the government. Maybe you should take it up with the former parliamentary secretary for Treasury.

Mr FORWOOD — I am taking it up with you.

The CHAIR — Thank you. I would like to take you to the community building initiative. You have outlined that in your overheads. I would like identified the funding criteria and how you assess the performance indicators and measurement of them.

Mr THWAITES — Of the community building initiative?

The CHAIR — In the community building initiative there is a section that particularly refers to community strengthening. I am really interested in funding criteria for community building, community strengthening and then how you assess their performance?

Mr THWAITES — Essentially we do look at a whole range of criteria.

The CHAIR — I imagine it is much more difficult to measure community strengthening than it is, for example, kilometres of road built. I would like you to explain that.

Mr THWAITES — The outcomes that we are seeking — and we do have a whole range of indicators that we are seeking — are based around things like people's ability to get support from other people in the community, how safe people feel and the ability for people to get help if they have got an emergency. So there is a whole lot of community indicators that we look to achieve as outcomes. In terms of the criteria for actually choosing the projects, what we know is that those projects that have strong community support before they are initiated are most likely to be successful, so we look for projects, for example, where the local council is involved. Secondly, we know that projects that have a good business plan are more likely to succeed, and that is why rather than just fund up front large projects — either building or community strengthening projects — we would prefer to plan a planning grant first, which means that the community group or the council do the planning up front and ensure that they have the business plan and the community support all worked out. So in terms of criteria that is the approach we would adopt.

Mr CLARK — My question follows on from that of the Chair. I refer you to page 239 of budget paper 3, which sets out the performance indicators under the community strengthening output. As you said in the past, community strengthening lies at the heart of your approach to government in Victoria. Given that and given the very limited number of performance indicators set out here, how on earth do you have any idea whether or not you are succeeding or failing in strengthening communities, how you are measuring whether or not you are strengthening communities and do you have any plans to improve the range of performance measures that are set out for this output group?

Mr THWAITES — We certainly do, and I am very pleased to be able to advise the committee that we do record and measure those outcomes. We have produced very recently an indicator of all of those, which is entitled 'Indicators of community strength at the local government area level in Victoria'. What we do to measure the indicators is survey work over time against a number of factors, and I will give you some examples of the types of factors. We measure participation by asking about attendance at community events in the last six months; participation in organised sport; being a member of an organised group; volunteering; parental participation in schools; or participation in decision-making boards and committees. So we ask all those questions over time and we look at the answers. We also ask about community attitudes. We ask about feeling safe walking down your street; feeling valued by society; feeling there are opportunities to have a say on the issues that are important to you; feeling that multiculturalism makes life in your area better; and liking the community you live in. Also, we ask

about the ability to get help when needed. We ask about the ability to get help from friends, family and neighbours when needed, or the ability to raise \$2000 in two days in an emergency. We ask all those quite practical questions and compare the answers over time. Overall, there has been an improvement since 2001, not in all but in the majority of those measures. I think it is probably too early to draw major conclusions from that, but if we look over a 6 or 10 year time frame we would hope to see real improvements in those areas.

Mr CLARK — Would you consider putting some of those indicators in the budget papers in future years?

Mr THWAITES — We will certainly consider that, but we will be releasing this today. I think that probably gives you a more complete picture. It is quite interesting; it has maps covering the whole state, so you get a real opportunity to see the difference in different areas. There are some quite stark differences in those various community strengthening measures.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Minister. Do you want the brochure to be recorded as ‘this’ or do you want to name it?

Mr THWAITES — Today we are releasing the ‘Indicators of community strength at the local government area level in Victoria’. It will be very interesting for communities, and it will be interesting for regional media and others to see some of this information.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Minister. That concludes the Victorian communities portfolio. I thank departmental officers for their attendance. My thanks also to those who have prepared extensively but who are not sitting up here as witnesses.

Witnesses withdrew.