

VERIFIED TRANSCRIPT

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into budget estimates 2007–08

Melbourne — 15 May 2007

Members

Mr G. Barber	Mr G. Rich-Phillips
Mr R. Dalla-Riva	Mr R. Scott
Ms J. Graley	Mr B. Stensholt
Ms J. Munt	Dr W. Sykes
Mr M. Pakula	Mr K. Wells

Chair: Mr B. Stensholt
Deputy Chair: Mr K. Wells

Staff

Business Support Officer: Ms J. Nathan

Witnesses

Mr J. Merlino, Minister for Sport, Recreation and Youth Affairs;
Mr S. Gregory, chief financial officer;
Mr T. Healy, acting deputy secretary, community strengthening; and
Ms L. Healy, executive director, community engagement, Department for Victorian Communities.

The CHAIR — I welcome to the table Ms Lill Healy, executive director, community engagement, Department for Victorian Communities.

I call on the minister to give a presentation of around 5 minutes on the more complex financial and performance information relating to the budget estimates for the youth affairs portfolio.

Overheads shown.

Mr MERLINO — Young people make up 19.2 per cent of the Victorian population with the majority in metropolitan Melbourne; 17 percent of Victoria's young people were born overseas. Taking an inclusive approach to youth policy means accounting for the diversity of young people and their experiences, their expression, which is often in new ways, and of differences in any negative impacts of disadvantage or discrimination.

The Office for Youth administers nine programs which support and involve young people. These include Youth Central, Australia's leading information webpage; the teenage Go for your Life positive body image strategy, which was established to change community attitudes and media messages about body image; Advance, a school-based youth leadership and skill development program focusing on development of and participation in civic partnerships; the FReeZA program, where young people develop skills through organising events for young people and attending training workshops in both metropolitan and rural regions; FReeZACentral, which assists young people to gain accredited training, team up with industry mentors and get hands-on experience in all areas of the live music industry. I will be happy to talk on each of those if the committee wishes.

The office also leads the government's whole-of-government policy development process and works through the youth affairs interdepartmental committee to ensure that the future directions outcome areas are being progressed and government action is coordinated.

The youth affairs portfolio in government leads the way in listening to young people, understanding their views and coordinating policy development, which is inclusive of and responsive to the needs of Victoria's young people. We do that in several ways. A whole-of-government interdepartmental committee for youth works across departments to coordinate action and develop integrated policy. There are 15 regional youth affairs networks that support a collaborative partnership approach to discussing issues that relate to young people in the local area, provide a forum to gain information from young people and provide valuable input to government.

YACVic, the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria, and the Centre for Multicultural Youth Issues are funded to provide peak advocacy services and to involve diverse young people in representing their views to government and in the wider community, and DVC is providing leadership through local teams that support the implementation of doing government differently and facilitating local strategy development across local and state governments.

In terms of the voice of young people, young people are directly involved in discussions and consultations with the Office for Youth and me to build our knowledge of issues affecting young people and have their voices heard. Youth consultation forums, which were held in 10 locations as part of the community cabinet process, form a key ongoing component of that communication. Youth Central is a key vehicle for raising the voice of young people through surveys and an active youth engagement and participation strategy. YACVic and CMYI each actively work to involve young people and bring the voices of young people to government. There is the regional youth affairs network, which I mentioned; National Youth Week, which is a strongly youth-led event which directly involved over 600 young people in its planning and operation; and Young People Direct, which I will talk about in a moment.

The new youth policy, 'Future Directions — an action agenda for young Victorians', establishes an overall policy framework which focuses government and community action in the five outcome areas which are set out in the slide. Being accountable to young people is a key priority for the Victorian government, so the Office for Youth, in partnership with other departments, will finalise measures for achievement and a monitoring mechanism for the outcomes contained in Future Directions. Young people's voices are central to the implementation of Future Directions. Involvement in participation will be encouraged through existing channels, such as the RYANs and Young People Direct, which will itself be shaped by further consultation.

In terms of key achievements, I will try to quickly run through these. There is the Future Directions policy, which involves consultation with 1300 organisations and individuals; the commitment of the government to recurrently fund Youth Central and extend its strategy; the Go for your Life positive body image initiative, which is a terrific

program to create community level programs and a media and fashion industry strategy to improve positive image; FReeZACentral; and Victoria Rocks, which is an extension of the innovative FReeZACentral program which better provides young people's ability to get involved in the music industry.

In terms of forward directions, the Victoria Rocks initiative will be implemented. Future Directions, our new youth policy, focuses strongly on outcomes for young people, and I will be working with the interdepartmental committee which I have established to strengthen the government's reporting against those outcome areas. With Young People Direct, I am looking forward to consulting with young people to shape the proposal for Young People Direct, which is an advisory committee I am establishing to bring the voice of young people directly to government. That is probably the missing gap, that direct voice to the minister for youth affairs. Thank you for the opportunity to present and I welcome any questions.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Minister. About 40 minutes has been allocated for questions on the youth affairs portfolio.

Ms GRALEY — Minister, I presume you are aware that I have probably more young people in my electorate than anywhere else in Australia so I am very interested in this issue. It is a major concern for many of us out in the city of Casey. I would like to refer you to page 265 of budget paper 3, which notes funding for advocacy body support under the heading of 'Connect — new ideas for young Victorians'. I am asking you, Minister, if you could provide some more information on which advocacy bodies are referred to and their future plans to add value for young Victorians.

Mr MERLINO — Thanks, Judith. Our advocacy bodies established in Victoria play a crucial role in the development of policy and providing advice to me. The note that you referred to refers to additional funding for the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria, the Centre for Multicultural Youth Issues and SYN FM. The increased funding will allow YACVic and CMYI to expand their work in the areas of consultation and engagement of young people and advocate for service responsiveness for young people from culturally diverse backgrounds. SYN FM will continue to allow the voice of young people to be heard across the airwaves.

YACVic and CMYI are currently funded by the Victorian government under a three-year funding and service agreement. YACVic is the peak body and leading advocacy group on young people's issues in Victoria. CMYI provides the government and the wider community with policy advice and commentary on issues affecting migrant and refugee young people. YACVic continues to work across government to inform policy development related to a number of issues impacting on young people — for example, the human rights charter, the proposed changes to young drivers' safety and graduated licensing. This year they have convened the first national youth affairs conference in nine years, which we hosted in Melbourne. That was a terrific achievement of YACVic. YACVic has also worked in partnership with the Office for Youth to provide advice on the government's refreshed future directions for young people through the involvement of young people and service providers to develop the government's youth policy statement *Future Directions*. YACVic also provides support to the Victorian Indigenous Youth Advisory Council and the Youth Disability Advocacy Service, so it is not just in one area.

In terms of the indigenous youth advisory council, that is funded through Aboriginal Affairs Victoria to strengthen local indigenous youth networks and enable indigenous young people across Victoria to have a strong voice into government. In terms of the Youth Disability Advocacy Service, the Youth Disability Advocacy Service enables young people with disabilities the opportunity to join YDAS and be involved in advocacy and decision making about the direction and priorities of this new advocacy service which aims to help improve their lives. DHS has funded YACVic in partnership with the Disability Discrimination Legal Service and Youthlaw to establish YDAS.

CMYI provides advice specifically around the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse young people. It is required to report to the Office for Youth every six months against performance measures from its funding agreement, and that is reviewed annually. The performance measures listed in the funding and service agreement outline activities related to strategic advice and policy analysis, communication and consultation and cross-sectorial networking and linkages. I will probably leave it at that, Chair. There is a lot more I could say; they are terrific advocacy groups.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much. We need to be economic in the way we have things answered.

Mr WELLS — Minister, I want to talk to you about the funding for the youth affairs department. But firstly, how many staff under 25 do you actually have in the department? The second part is obviously at budget

paper 3, page 242; total expenditure in youth affairs has actually decreased from last year to the forward estimates, a decrease of about 3.2 per cent. Have the needs of the youth in Victoria declined or has the money been shifted to another department?

Mr MERLINO — Thanks, Kim. I will deal with young people — —

Mr WELLS — Not including student placements.

Mr MERLINO — Okay, all right. The Office for Youth employs six young people under the age of 26 full time, and that does include two trainees.

Mr WELLS — So that is four.

Mr MERLINO — Four people plus the two trainees. The youth employment scheme has provided the two young people to be employed as trainees. The young people gain experience and learn new skills in office administration, teamwork, computer skills, data systems, communicating et cetera. I anticipated that you would ask that question about how many young people we directly employ through the Office for Youth, but there is a whole range of other things where there is direct engagement and involvement and work of young people, so it is not just the six that we employ within the office. If I could just quickly go through that.

Youth Central provides opportunities for young people to work with the Office for Youth to deliver content and creativity and the participation of more than 3423 young people in 2006 from all over Victoria through the creative content design, multimedia productions, workshops, consultations, on and offline participation. There is current participation of more than 42 individual young people actively employed as roving reporters and 12 editorial team members. So they are doing work.

Mr WELLS — So six out of a total staff of how many?

Mr MERLINO — Out of a total staff of 30.

Mr WELLS — And the second part was about the funding decrease.

The CHAIR — Page 242.

Mr MERLINO — Yes. I will talk about the change in the budget, and then I will talk about the 07–08 budget. The budget is now \$14.9 million, as you referred to; previously it was 15.4. So I will run you through the budget, Kim.

The 07–08 allocation of \$14.9 million funding enables the funding of the government policy objectives for youth affairs, including the implementation of all new initiatives. So that includes Victoria Rocks and the increase in funding to YACVic and the Centre for Multicultural Youth Issues, which I just referred to, and the maintenance of existing programs including FReeZA, FReeZACentral, Youth Participation and Access, Advance and the positive body image program. Kim, the answer to your question is that there is the maintenance of the existing programs, plus new funding for new initiatives such as Victoria Rocks and increased funding for the advocacy bodies.

The two new initiatives I would like to highlight are the funding of the positive body image program, and the support we have provided to YACVic. The positive body image strategy is providing targeted resources for communities. It will enable us to work more effectively with the media, with schools and with sports clubs to drill home the message about positive body image, and, as I have said, we have increased support to YACVic to assist young people have a voice in public affairs.

The Bracks government election policy committed the incoming government to efficient government. So the Office for Youth is no different to any other department that a minister is responsible for, so there is a change in that budget. It is aimed at reducing red tape, achieving productivity gains, increasing strategies to share ICT and other services, and administering grants more efficiently. DVC is leading the efficient grants administration strategy, a process which will contribute to administrative savings across government. Changes to the youth affairs output funding reflect broader changes to machinery-of-government arrangements. This difference arises due to the need to take into account the full year impacts of the machinery-of-government changes in all DVC portfolios. There has been no direct impact on program and operational funding, so I am quite comfortable with the budget as it stands.

Ms MUNT — Minister, as the mother of a teenager I know that a lot of her entertainment, interest, socialising and information-gathering is through the internet now. There are so many MySpace pages, it is amazing. I have noticed a line item in budget paper 3, page 241, that talks about the Youth Central website page impressions, where it gives the actual and the target. I was wondering if you could just expand on that website and its use for the committee. Knowing my daughter I would imagine that it would be a very popular resource for young people to gather information.

Mr MERLINO — This is a terrific story to tell in terms of this website. Since its launch nearly two and a half years ago, Youth Central — www.youthcentral.vic.gov.au — has maintained its position as one of Australia's most popular government youth websites. The Youth Central website total page impressions target of 250 000 to 300 000 for the 06–07 year has been exceeded quite significantly due to an active online marketing strategy.

Ms MUNT — I am not surprised.

Mr MERLINO — This involved a targeted investment in a new search optimisation strategy, which has been very successful. There has also been an increased general recognition of the website by young people, so the expected outcome for 06–07 is now 700 000, and it is anticipated that outcomes will continue to increase over time. Youth Central is much more than a website offering Victorian young people a single access point to a broad range of youth-based government services and resources. With over 50 per cent of all content on the site being produced by young people, Youth Central gives voice to young people's views, ideas and creativity and provides young people with opportunities to set directions for their future life choices and employment.

In participation terms, I talked about the 3423 young people from all over Victoria who are participating in training workshops, content production, design and multimedia production and who have provided consultation, signed up for membership and entered competition. In this past year Youth Central has actively employed 42 roving reporters and a further 12 young people as editorial team members.

I have seen the roving reporters in action — for example, Ashlea Milner is the Youth Central sport and body image reporter who covered the recent FINA swimming championships and has also written about the Victorian government's funding support of the Butterfly Foundation's positive body image program. In her role as a sports reporter for Youth Central, Ashlea has been able to combine this part-time work with her studies and hopes it will help her become a professional sports journalist. So it is also very much about skills development. That is just one story of a person who has become involved with Youth Central and influenced other young people to participate and be informed.

In terms of its online performance, Youth Central has enjoyed the highest weekly market share of both visits and pages viewed of all other Australian state government youth websites. This includes outperforming the Australian government's national website for youth, 'The source'. The success of the initiative to date is also reflected in a range of new cross-government partnerships and one-off youth policy online consultations. These include collaborative projects with the Department of Education and the Department of Human Services, digital story-telling projects, an innovative IT-focused content partnership with Multimedia Victoria, a dedicated cross-departmental schoolies week website, external partnerships with Victoria University and the Northern Metropolitan Institute of TAFE, and the 2006 Commonwealth Games daily reporting of events by roving reporters.

There is a whole range of things that happen on this website including, in addition, online consultations, a major youth policy consultation with over 400 young people for the development of the Future Directions agenda by the Office for Youth, a privacy Victoria online questionnaire on privacy issues for young people, and VicRoads' promotion of graduated licensing consultation forms for young people.

I just want to finish on the point that we took on board the comments that PAEC had previously made in terms of performance measures and making them reflect the performance of particular programs. I am pleased to inform you that we took on board those comments you made last year and we have increased the targets that we have set for the Youth Central website.

The CHAIR — That is good. We can expect an offer from James Packer or Rupert Murdoch any time now to take it over, is that correct?

Mr MERLINO — That is right.

Mr RICH-PHILLIPS — Minister, I would just like to clarify a statement in your budget day press release in relation to the funding. The press release stated that \$14 million was provided in the budget for youth programs. Is that \$14 million worth of initiatives in new money, or does it include the carry forward of initiatives from last year, which I think was \$13 million? Is it a total of \$27 million, or is it partially carried forward?

Mr MERLINO — One of the differences, Gordon, between the budget this year — \$14.9 million — and previously is that we have taken out that 06–07 carryover of \$500 000, so that is not included in the 14.9 .

Mr RICH-PHILLIPS — So the 14 you refer to in your press release is all new money?

Mr MERLINO — It is some new money and some existing.

Mr RICH-PHILLIPS — Can you provide a breakdown of how much is new and how much is existing, please?

Mr MERLINO — I am happy to; I will provide that on notice, Chair, if I could.

The CHAIR — Thanks very much for that.

Mr PAKULA — Minister, I am interested in the Advance program. It is outlined on page 265, but it is also mentioned on page 241. The targets in terms of those participating in it seem to have been well exceeded, so I would like you to explain to the committee what the program actually is, how schools participate in it and why you have changed the performance measure targets.

Mr MERLINO — This is also another good story, and it is reflected in taking on board PAEC's previous comments in terms of performance measures. I will get to that secondly. In terms of what Advance is, it is a school-based youth development program that provides practical opportunities for young people to work during the school year in partnership with community organisations on projects that contribute to building their local community. Young people participate in challenging activities which develop their connection to the community, and communication and project management skills. Young people, schools and a diverse range of community organisations create networks by working together to achieve shared goals.

Through the Advance program young people are encouraged and empowered to participate in all aspects of project planning and decision making. Young people demonstrate leadership, learn new skills and volunteer in community projects. It attracts a range of diverse community organisations as program partners with schools. The program is available to all government secondary schools including special and special development schools. Secondary schools register an expression of interest with the Office for Youth each year. Schools are then provided with annual funding and professional development to deliver Advance. It includes a broad range of young people who participate right from year 7 to year 12.

Advance may also be used as core component of the VCAL curriculum. Advance schools are required to demonstrate a formal partnership between the school and the community organisation, and young people are involved in the planning, decision making and implementation of their community projects. The flexible framework of Advance allows for maximum local decision making for those delivering the program. This flexibility is demonstrated, for example, at Baimbridge College senior VCAL young people formed a partnership with the Hamilton junior footy league and the Shire of Southern Grampians to plan, design and install coaches boxes at a local football ground. The young people obtained sponsorship for the project and worked closely with stakeholders and community partners. Through the project, young people learnt skills in project management, research, design and costings as well as communication and interpersonal skills. It is a terrific program, providing young people with wonderful skills that they take into later life — a great success.

I will come to the change in terms of performance measure targets. Last year PAEC suggested that youth affairs' targets be reviewed. In the 06 calendar year the Advance program was delivered in 385 school campuses. The revised 07–08 budget targets for Advance reflect this increased uptake of the program. Due to the success of the program participation rates have generally been higher than the targets specified in the contracts; therefore the funding program has achieved performance above the level funded. More kids and more schools want to be involved in the program. This year the target number of schools participating in Advance has been increased to 400–410, and the number of young people participating has been increased to the range of 10 000–10 250.

The CHAIR — Minister, that is for 2007, is it?

Mr MERLINO — Yes.

The CHAIR — So what are you looking for in 2008, or is that just a bit too far ahead?

Mr MERLINO — The 07–08 target in the budget year is for the 07 calendar year.

The CHAIR — The footnote says that, yes.

Mr MERLINO — So the next budget, 08–09, will be for the 08 calendar year.

The CHAIR — If you can give us an estimate, perhaps, on notice for 2008.

Mr MERLINO — Yes, I am happy to do that.

The CHAIR — Since half the expenditure is, of course, in this particular budget.

Mr MERLINO — This high level of performance has been achieved as some schools are able to enrol more students in the program than the funded level of up to 21 students. This high level of performance has been achieved within the existing program budget. To extend Advance for another four years to 2011, a commitment has been made providing more young Victorians with opportunities to get involved in volunteering. Probably the two programs I wanted to highlight today were Youth Central and Advance. They exceeded targets, and we are raising the bar for the future of those two programs.

The CHAIR — All in the context of the same amount of money.

Dr SYKES — I congratulate you on the initiative with Youth Central. If it is achieving, as you describe it, then it addresses one of my main concerns which is the issue of productivity and coordination of service delivery — firstly, the principle of a one-stop shop or one gateway of entry, which this seems to provide, and secondly, the service providers working together.

Whilst it might stray outside of your area of responsibility at little bit, there have been examples in the community I have worked with where you might have 30 people providing services to youth in the area, but they operate in a silo mentality. It is when you bring them together like this that suddenly they find out that the person they had a cup of coffee with is actually working in the same area. That is problem no. 1

Problem no. 2 is that there is a failure to share information. Even people who are in the same organisations seem to hide behind the privacy legislation, and someone providing guidance on, say, sexual assault to young people and another providing guidance on single parenting do not share basic information because of privacy concerns. In fact that does not need to be the case; you can get client approval.

Have you got any other initiatives? Firstly, are you aware of the underlying issue, and secondly, do you have any other initiatives to improve the coordination of service delivery to youth?

Mr MERLINO — Thanks, Bill. I appreciate the question because this is one of the issues that I am putting a fair amount of work into, and I have some good things to say in terms of what we are doing currently. You have given a regional example: I recently did a presentation regarding youth services. If I can pluck out one municipality as an example, Wyndham City Council had, I think, 87 youth service providers. So there is not a lack of organisations in our communities delivering a whole range of programs and support to young people. Whether it is specific in terms of drug and alcohol or whether it is more general in terms of local government, there is a whole range of organisations providing support, and I think the issue of coordination is an important one, so I welcome the question.

I have done a couple of things, as I said earlier. One is to establish the interdepartmental committee on youth affairs. This is across government, so there is better coordination and communication across government. There is also the support of the 15 RYANs across the state. They have a role to play in terms of those local networks in coordinating local providers. Infoxchange plays a very important role through the internet in sharing information with local providers. A young person may go through a drug and alcohol program, but there might be some other

areas in which that young person needs support, so Infoxchange is a good way to connect organisations and service providers.

There is also the youth services improvement project with DHS and the Office for Children. That is a key coordination that we need to do — Office for Children under Minister Neville and Office for Youth under me — because there is quite a bit of crossover; 12 to 25 under my portfolio and Office for Children under Minister Neville. They are some of the things we are doing, but it is an important issue that you raise.

Dr SYKES — One of your challenges, though, is to address the mindset of the people out there. It is one thing to put in place programs, but it is really important to get a change in the mindset of the service deliverers, so good luck with the challenge. I will help you with it, but good luck with it.

Mr SCOTT — My question relates to the FReeZA program and the FReeZACentral program which you referred to on page 241 of budget paper 3. Can the minister please explain to the committee the difference between these two programs?

Mr MERLINO — Yes, thanks, Robin. The FReeZA program provides opportunities for young people, as I said, aged 12 to 25 across Victoria to actively participate in their local communities. It is an innovative youth development program that engages young people through all stages in developing local drug, alcohol and smoke-free music and cultural events. One of the reasons why it is a very successful program is that young people actually develop the proposals from the beginning. They are events for young people, developed and provided by young people.

FReeZA is an annual grants program where local governments and community organisations work in partnership with young people to run five music and cultural events throughout the year. Due to the increasing success of this program, 76 community organisations across Victoria received grants in 06–07, with 45 of those located in rural and regional areas. Local FReeZA events, organised by young people, aim to strengthen the relationship with the local community and cater to a broad spectrum of young people's interests and skills.

FReeZA events include, for example, Battle of the Bands competitions, youth stages and performances at community festivals, skate and BMX competitions, performances at art and film exhibitions, music, song-writing, dance and hip-hop workshops.

The FReeZACentral program was implemented in 2004 to build on the success of the FReeZA program by providing training and mentoring opportunities for young people interested in the music industry; it is that next step. They have got involved in local FReeZA events but have actually got a real interest in developing their skills and going into the music industry. The FreezaCentral program is run by a consortium of The Push and Mushroom Marketing in partnership with Victoria University.

The FReeZACentral program provides young people aged 15 to 25 who are interested in pursuing a career in the music industry with accredited training, one-on-one mentoring with music industry professionals, hands-on event management experience in four music tour events, and the recording of a CD; I have got those CDs with me. I have had a good listen to them. I was at the graduation a few weeks ago; it was terrific. The music is very, very good.

I am pleased to announce that up to December 06 the FReeZA program has delivered 250 youth music and cultural events across Victoria. In the first half of the 06–07 year, 73 230 young people have enjoyed and participated in these performances and community events. To date FReeZA agencies have been able to achieve more attendances than they are contracted to provide. The FReeZA program runs in over 90 per cent of Victoria's local government areas, ensuring that the vast majority of young people in Victoria have a chance to participate in, attend or perform at a FReeZA event in their local community. I am pleased to report that FReeZA is on target for 06–07 for both the number of grants approved and for attendance. However, this will always fluctuate from year to year depending on the size of the actual event.

In terms of measuring participation, young people participate in the FReeZA program by forming a local FReeZA committee to actively plan and run the cultural and music events; attending and enjoying the alcohol, drug-free and smoke-free events organised by the committee; performing as artists in the events; and providing additional volunteer support in the planning and running of events. Participation in the program is measured by the number of young people attending the FReeZA events across the state each year and the number of events organised.

Due to the success of the program, participation rates have generally been higher than the target specified in contracts; therefore, the program has achieved performance above the level. FReeZA-funded providers are evaluated on an annual basis through the performance reporting process prescribed within those funding agreements.

I was recently at the Moonee Valley City Council, which had a great event. That Moonee Valley event was the biggest national youth week event in the whole of the state. So it is quite terrific. It is a great program.

The CHAIR — Thank you. I noticed they are all on ‘myspace.com’, which is one of my kids’ favourite websites.

Mr BARBER — Minister, you have said several times today that YACVic is funded to provide statewide advocacy.

Mr MERLINO — Yes.

Mr BARBER — What it has been advocating for is generalist early intervention youth services. In fact they wrote a report in 2006 called *Who’s Carrying the Can?* and they point out that what you have actually been providing — and this is an increasing trend in the forward estimates — is targeted crisis-type services for youth at risk. Specifically, you have taken money from the general youth grants and put it into family mediation. This is a particular problem in rural and regional areas, where the male suicide rate is double what it is for other areas, which is a good enough indicator. We have never really had a generalist youth service in Victoria, so why is your approach to go more towards the targeted end of things and less towards early intervention?

Mr MERLINO — Thanks, Greg. It really follows on to my answer that I gave Bill. It is an issue raised by YACVic, as you said. It has also been raised, and members would be aware, at the interface councils — the nine interface councils also raised this issue of generalist youth services. VCOSS has raised it as well. So this is an issue that has been raised within the youth sector and I am aware of that and the government is working on those issues raised. But it is about picking up what I said before. What the issue is is coordination and provision of generalist youth services. We are working, as I said, at establishing the IDC, and I am working in collaboration with the Minister for Children in raising this issue of generalist youth services.

So I acknowledge the issue. It has been raised — it was raised late last year. I recall — members may have been at this meeting of the interface councils — I think in September or October last year there was a briefing of interface councils to members of Parliament. So in terms of my answer today, I acknowledge that the issue has been raised by various organisations, and it is something that I will be working on in terms of a response.

Ms GRALEY — To move from something as fun as hip-hop workshops to whole-of-government reporting, I refer to page 241 of budget paper 3, which notes that the youth affairs portfolio is required to develop and coordinate whole-of-government reporting. I ask the minister to explain how the Office for Youth does its reporting and the future impact of this reporting on this important portfolio.

Mr MERLINO — This is an important question, because it is not just the performance measures that are in the budget papers; it is quite important in terms of whole-of-government reporting and how we provide that information to the public. Whole-of-government reporting involves the collection of data from across government on the impact of programs for young people. That is the other thing with this portfolio, that a lot of things that impact on young people occur from other portfolios, other departmental initiatives. The process involves all departments providing case study material and statistics to illustrate how well young people are faring across a wide range of activities. The annual report, Youth Focus, is released each year and contains an overview of progress we are making. The Future Directions outcome areas were developed to measure progress in improving the lives of all young Victorians. They provide a coordinating framework for all government policy and action in the youth affairs portfolio.

I recently released *Youth Focus in Victoria 2005–2006*, the fourth whole-of-government report on youth affairs. The report provides a snapshot of young people in Victoria in 05–06 and reports against each of the five outcome areas in the government’s Future Directions policy statement. The 05–06 report outlines young people’s participation in community life and provides data on education and training, justice and safety, and health and wellbeing. The data in the report shows that we are continuing to make steady progress in improving the health and wellbeing of most young Victorians.

I might skip some of this, Chair, because I know you are interested in what happens in terms of the future. In 2007 I will be strengthening this focus on reporting against outcomes. Two initiatives will assist in this process: I have established, as I said, an interdepartmental committee to provide a whole-of-government perspective on how Future Directions outcome areas are being progressed; and I have also asked for the Office for Youth to work with the Office for Children to produce a status of Victoria's young people report in late 2007.

However, the government intends to strengthen the outcomes focus. Last year the children's services coordination board established under the new Child Wellbeing and Safety Act 2005 produced the first *The State of Victoria's Children* report. Using sociodemographic and population health data, which is a part of developing the Victorian child and adolescent monitoring system as well as material emerging from the Victorian community indicators project, a more comprehensive view of how young people are faring is now emerging. This is a really exciting development.

In coming years the government increasingly will report on progress in achieving each outcome area using a suite of agreed performance measures. Each of these will be strongly directed towards measuring results achieved for young people. This will ensure that our reporting focuses on the differences to young Victorians' lives that result from our activities. We are going to do some further work in terms of whole-of-government reporting.

The CHAIR — That will be good. You will also have the census data coming up in about June, so that will also be very useful for that sort of analysis. Final question from Mr Dalla-Riva.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — Minister, I note that the Victorian government has allocated \$2.1 million over the next four years to the positive body image strategy, and I ask: is any of this funding proposed going to be used to educate our youth on the dangers of body piercing, and has there been any discussion by the government on the possibility of bringing in legislation to make it illegal for our youth under 16 to undergo body piercing without the consent of their parents?

Mr MERLINO — Thanks, Richard, for the question.

Mr PAKULA — Do you have any?

Mr DALLA-RIVA — I do not have any, Mr Pakula, thank you. But thanks for asking.

Mr PAKULA — No obvious ones.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — No obvious ones, anyway.

Mr MERLINO — The body image strategy is exciting, and it is quite significant. I recently went to a forum where there were 34 students from schools across Victoria. The forum was all about teaching those young people about how images are manipulated and digitally enhanced. It is quite extraordinary in terms of what we see in the media, images on television and in magazines, how images are distorted. People are skinnier, noses, hair — the whole kit and caboodle.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — I have seen your portrait, yes!

Mr MERLINO — One of the key things is getting those young people out to their schools and starting to disseminate this message. There is a community advisory committee on body image and also a media committee on body image that will look at developing a voluntary code of conduct for the media advertising fashion industries. There is a lot of work that we are doing which is quite exciting, because it directly impacts on people. It does not matter whether they are metropolitan kids or kids in rural and regional areas, poor body image leads to harming activities, harming behaviours, depression, anorexia nervosa, eating disorders. This is quite a significant program, and I am pleased to say that the state government is leading the way in terms of the country. We are the first government to really invest in this issue.

In terms of the specific issue you raised about body piercing and recent quite horrific reports in terms of body piercing and some of the outcomes if it is done in the backyard, that is an issue for DHS; it is not an issue that I have responsibility for as minister for youth, but it is an important issue to be raised.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — You said there an advisory committee about to be started, or it has started?

Mr MERLINO — The community advisory committee has been established, and I will be appointing a chair of that committee very shortly.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — Will part of its reference, I gather, be looking at the issues? Even though, as you say, it is within DHS, would part of that be in your portfolio of youth to actually advise on particular issues such as body piercing for people under the age of 16, for example?

Mr MERLINO — The committee's responsibility is essentially implementing the recommendations of the parliamentary inquiry. That is where it began. It began with a parliamentary inquiry. So responsibility is really about implementing that. That is about supporting local communities in positive body image strategies. That is in essence the responsibility of the committee. Responsibility in terms of regulation and legislation regarding piercing is really with DHS.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — And funding is within the budget for that advisory committee?

Mr MERLINO — It is out of the Community Support Fund. It is a Go for Your Life appropriation, Richard.

The CHAIR — Just a couple of things before we conclude. I just note you mentioned the performance measures on Youth Affairs and you have actually adjusted some of them. I note in regard to the FReeZA ones that you might look at the FReeZA attendance ones: 159 000 one year and 150 000 expected this year, but you are still looking in terms of next year 130 000. Similarly it is not quite the same variation, but in regard to FReeZACentral intensive workshops 666, 550 and you are looking for 500 next year. So maybe you want to do a similar process in regard to those particular measures.

Also in regard to the departmental response to the estimates questionnaire and question 9.1 on communication, advertising and promotion, we have sent a letter asking for a fuller answer in regard to that particular question, and I guess the committee would appreciate that response because we need to include that in our report and have some consistency between departments. I am afraid the Department for Victorian Communities did not seem to be able to say much at all about communication, advertising and promotion.

That concludes consideration of the budget estimates for the portfolios of sport and recreation and youth affairs. I thank the minister, witnesses and departmental officers for their attendance today. It has been a very good session. Where questions have been taken on notice the committee will follow up with you in writing at a later date. We request a written response to those matters be provided within 30 days and they will be there for consideration and inclusion in the future report of this committee. Thank you, minister.

Witnesses withdrew.