

VERIFIED VERSION

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into budget estimates 2012–13

Melbourne — 16 May 2012

Members

Mr N. Angus

Mr P. Davis

Ms J. Hennessy

Mr D. Morris

Mr D. O'Brien

Mr M. Pakula

Mr R. Scott

Chair: Mr P. Davis

Deputy Chair: Mr M. Pakula

Staff

Executive Officer: Ms V. Cheong

Witnesses

Mr N. Kotsiras, Minister for Multicultural Affairs and Citizenship,

Mr H. Akyol, Director, Office of Multicultural Affairs and Citizenship, and

Mr D. Speagle, Deputy Secretary, Federalism, Citizenship and Climate Change Group, Department of Premier and Cabinet.

**Necessary corrections to be notified to
executive officer of committee**

The CHAIR — I declare open the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee hearing on the 2012–13 budget estimates for the portfolio of multicultural affairs and citizenship. On behalf of the committee I welcome the Honourable Nicholas Kotsiras, MP, Minister for Multicultural Affairs and Citizenship, and from the Department of Premier and Cabinet: Mr Hakan Akyol, director, Office of Multicultural Affairs and Citizenship; and Mr Donald Speagle, deputy secretary, federalism, citizenship and climate change group. Members of Parliament, departmental officers, members of the public and the media are also welcome.

In accordance with the guidelines for public hearings, I remind members of the public gallery that they cannot participate in any way 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 to provide information to the minister, by leave of myself as chairman. Written communication to witnesses can only be provided via officers of the PAEC secretariat. Members of the media are also requested to observe the guidelines for filming or recording proceedings in the Legislative Council Committee Room, and no more than two TV cameras are allowed at any one time in the allocated spaces. May I remind TV camera operators to remain focused only on the persons speaking and that panning of the public gallery, committee members and witnesses is strictly prohibited. As previously advised to witnesses here today, I am pleased to announce that these hearings are being webcast live on the Parliament's website.

All evidence taken by this committee is taken under the provisions of the Parliamentary Committees Act, attracts parliamentary privilege and is protected from judicial review. However, any comments made outside the precincts of the hearing are not protected by parliamentary privilege. This committee has determined that there is no need for evidence to be sworn; however, witnesses are reminded that all questions must be answered in full and with accuracy and truthfulness. Any persons found to be giving false or misleading evidence may be in contempt of Parliament and subject to penalty.

All evidence given today is being recorded. Witnesses will be provided with proof versions of the transcript to be verified and returned within two working days of this hearing. Unverified transcripts and PowerPoint presentations will be placed on the committee's website immediately following receipt, to be replaced by verified transcripts within five days of receipt.

Following a presentation by the minister, committee members will ask questions relating to the inquiry. Generally the procedure followed will be that relating to questions in the Legislative Assembly.

I ask that all mobile telephones be turned off.

I now call on the minister to give a brief presentation of no more than 10 minutes on the more complex financial and performance information that relates to the budget estimates for the multicultural affairs and citizenship portfolio.

Mr KOTSIRAS — Thank you, Chair. I am going to provide briefly an outline of the government's achievements, policies and initiatives in the multicultural affairs and citizenship portfolio.

Overheads shown.

Mr KOTSIRAS — If you look at slide 1, you find that Victoria's cultural and linguistic diversity is one of our defining features, with people living in Victoria coming from over 200 countries, speaking over 200 different languages and dialects and practising more than 120 different religions and faiths, while 45 per cent were either born overseas or had one parent born overseas. This will change when we get the ABS 2011 census statistics in June of this year, because we are relying on 2006 figures.

As I have said often, this diversity is one of our greatest strengths, and it does provide Victoria with tremendous ongoing social, cultural and economic benefits, because if you have a strong multicultural society, you tend to attract overseas visitors, international students and investment and the economy will grow through job creation and export activity. These benefits are enhanced through the government's targeted support to our communities with an emphasis on citizenship, which is the foundation upon which we tend to build a strong and unified society where people are able to work and live together.

If we go to slide 2, we believe that a strong and ongoing commitment to multiculturalism is required to ensure the continued success of the state. While we are leaders in Australia, we cannot be complacent, and this is

shown through the government's success in maintaining all the commitments and programs as outlined in the previous state budget. We have delivered on our commitment to strengthen the independence of the VMC and to establish the Office of Multicultural Affairs and Citizenship. The new act also places the concept of citizenship, which is vital to a cohesive, multicultural society, at the core of the government's approach to multicultural affairs. The Act also enshrines in legislation a whole-of-government approach to multiculturalism, and the new Office of Multicultural Affairs and Citizenship has driven policy and program implementation in a number of fields.

If we turn to the next slide, the Victorian government is committed to continue to support our cultural diversity and will continue to ensure that Victoria leads the other states. We need to ensure that the community is constantly engaged but also that newly arrived migrants are able to contribute and feel part of Victoria. If we do that, then we will be able to utilise the social, cultural and economic advantages that are derived from our newly arrived migrants. So our multicultural policy aims to provide services in a culturally sensitive and appropriate manner to promote the rights and responsibilities of all Victorians, to harness the benefits that migration brings, to continue to promote a sense of belonging and a sense of unity and of course to celebrate our uniqueness and our diversity.

If we go to the next slide, I will outline a number of key initiatives. As members would know, we amended the Multicultural Affairs Act to also include the concept of citizenship, because I believe you cannot only have support for multiculturalism unless you have also taken into account citizenship or what binds us, what brings us together, what makes us feel proud as Victorians and as Australians. So while Australian citizenship in a formal sense is overseen by the commonwealth, underpinning this is the important social concept of citizenship, which confers the balance of rights and responsibilities to everyone living in Victoria. We see citizenship as the basis of a strong, harmonious and unified society where individuals share, exchange, respect and learn from each other. The government will continue to ensure that citizenship plays a key role in the programs and policies that we will implement.

If we look at the next slide, the key achievements in the 2011–12 financial year, as I said earlier, the Multicultural Victoria Act came into being in September 2011. It articulated the principles of multiculturalism, it enshrined citizenship as being at the core of our cohesive and harmonious society and it provided for the independence of the VMC. The VMC has been strengthened, because the Commission now has got the ability to investigate without my permission any systemic failures across government. We have recruited 10 new commissioners, including a youth representative and a representative from a peak organisation; in this case the ECCV. The Act also provides for the establishment of the eight regional advisory councils, which are at the grassroots level to provide information or feedback to the Commission for it to be able to ensure that there are programs in place to meet the needs of newly arrived migrants to make them feel at home and to be active members of the community. It also re-established the reporting requirements for government departments. All government departments must report to us, and then I will make a report to the Parliament for members to see what the departments are doing to meet the individual needs of all Victorians.

Another initiative was the establishment of the settlement coordination unit within DPC. This unit was established to ensure that the three tiers of government work together to make sure that there is no overlapping, there is no duplication, and that if there are any gaps, to bring those gaps to the attention of the government in order for us to try to rectify and to fill in those gaps. It is a great way to coordinate all three tiers of government. They also have the responsibility of implementing the rights and responsibilities seminars, which are held throughout Victoria. These rights and responsibilities seminars are talking about the rights of newly arrived migrants, but they also encourage them to participate and be active members of the community.

Another achievement was the Unity through Partnerships grants program. This was introduced last year at a cost of \$1.1 million per year, and it allows groups to come together to share their differences and to ensure that people understand, respect and are able to live with each other in peace and harmony.

If we go to the next slide, the cultural precincts, this program was established by the previous government. There was \$10 million put aside to help improve Lonsdale Street, Lygon Street and Little Bourke Street Precincts. It was a \$10 million program. It was fantastic. Last year we also put some money aside for the South Asian Building Fund and also \$2 million for the Antipodes Centre for Greek Culture, Heritage and Language. So that was a total of \$12 million for that program. Of course we had the Multicultural Awards for Excellence,

which again the former government introduced, but this government introduced two new awards — the Victorian Multicultural Honour Roll and the Victorian Multicultural Business Awards.

Finally, languages services. It is very difficult at times to communicate. You can imagine what it is like to try to communicate in another language, so that is why we thought it was important to invest an extra \$2 million for newly emerging languages where there are not enough interpreters in translating both in metropolitan Melbourne and in regional Victoria. Indeed last night I had the pleasure to present 28 scholarships to recipients as part of the 2012 interpreter scholarship presentation in Queen's Hall. It is important that we have high-quality and enough interpreters and translators to meet the needs of newly arrived migrants and refugees.

If we go to the next slide, the community grants program, again this is not new; it is \$5.6 million program. This is a very popular grants program. We have over 2400 organisations that receive a small amount that goes a long way towards making sure that they are active and that they participate in the community.

Previously I spoke about the cultural precincts. We have also put in place another project, which was commenced by the previous government again, called Enhancing Our Cultural Precincts and Community Infrastructure Fund. That is a \$12 million program; \$6 million was spent by the previous government, \$3 million will be spent next financial year and \$3 million in 2013–14.

Of course we have also got the Promoting Multifaith and Multicultural Harmony Program, which again tries to unify people to ensure that we continue to live in a harmonious society. In that of course we have got Cultural Diversity Week, which also includes Viva Victoria and also the Premier's gala dinner, where about 1400 people enjoy a wonderful evening of coming together as Victorians.

Of course we have also tried to promote a whole-of-government approach to multicultural affairs, which is what I said to you last year. It is all about making sure that every minister and every department is relevant and meets the needs of individual Victorians. Departments cannot put people who have just arrived — newly arrived migrants — into a silo and say to the Office of Multicultural Affairs and Citizenship, 'No, it's your responsibility'. Each department has to be responsible for all Victorians. That is why we gave the Minister for Youth Affairs, who I am sure will say something about this on Friday, \$1.8 million for the establishment of two regional offices — one in Morwell and one in Ballarat — to look after, again, the needs of newly arrived refugee youth.

The next slide is the budget initiatives for 2012–13. We have increased the budget from \$19.6 million in the previous financial year to \$21.4 million this year. There are three programs: one is the refugee support program, which is \$5.2 million over four years, and the VMC, an additional \$400 000, over four years. The VMC has received \$400 000 over four years to assist it with the regional advisory councils. The Chair of the VMC requested some additional resources — \$10 000 per council and \$20 000 for administrative costs. As I advised you last year, we are here to assist and to make sure that they are able to carry out their duties, so they got the \$100 000 a year to make sure that the regional advisory councils do complete their work.

I will leave it that. I am happy to take questions, Chair.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much, Minister. In the remaining time, which is about 45 minutes, we will take questions on the budget estimates for the multicultural affairs and citizenship portfolio. Minister, I ask: given the key growth and efficiency initiatives announced in the budget, can you please outline for the committee the likely impact of the budget on enhancing service delivery, promoting productivity and achieving efficiency gains within your portfolio? In responding, could also indicate how you intend to monitor the portfolio's effectiveness in maximising improvements in these areas?

Mr KOTSIRAS — From the outset I will say that the budget for my portfolio has increased from \$19.6 million to \$21.4 million. That is an increase of 9.2 per cent. As I said earlier, this is made up of a one-off grant of \$2 million to the Antipodes centre. It continues the refugee support program, which was sunseting this financial year, and also provides \$100 000 for the regional advisory councils to ensure that they are able to carry out their duties. We will monitor the effectiveness of the regional advisory councils through the VMC, through the settlement coordination unit and through OMAC, and of course we will work in partnership with other key stakeholders and they will provide feedback to us as well. So our budget has increased, and I think newly arrived migrants will be able to integrate and feel part of the Victorian community.

The CHAIR — Thank you, minister. Briefly, would you please inform the committee what you consider to be the likely impact on the community stakeholders of the initiatives you have outlined?

Mr KOTSIRAS — There will be absolutely no adverse impact on any key stakeholders; in fact key stakeholders will benefit from this budget. I have had a number of emails from the key stakeholders — ECCV, MAV, the community languages and the Australian Multicultural Foundation — saying what a wonderful budget for multicultural affairs and citizenship because not only have we kept the programs but we have also increased the budget, so I think it is win-win for all our stakeholders.

Mr PAKULA — Minister, I have just one that might not be quite so much of a win-win. We asked the Premier about this the other day, so I am just trying to get some further information. We asked the Premier about the refugee support program which I think you outlined was funded at \$5.2 million over four years. That, as far as we can tell, replaces a four-year, \$17.7 million program from the 08–09 budget. As you are keenly aware, that program is used to provide health nurses for refugees, tutoring support, after-school homework support and the like. We asked the Premier if and how that will all be impacted by the change from a \$17.7 million program to a \$5.2 million program, and his response, if I am quoting correctly, was: ‘I am very confident that the resources are being provided’. I suppose the nub of the question is — and I certainly would not expect you to disagree with the Premier, but I would ask you to just explain how it is that those resources are being provided, if they are in fact being provided. Is that detail somewhere else in the budget? Over to you.

Mr KOTSIRAS — Mr Pakula, I think you have mistaken two different programs. There is the refugee support program and the refugee support strategy. The refugee support strategy, which was in the 2008–09 budget at about \$17 million, did not go, first of all, to the office of multicultural affairs. It did go — you are right — to justice, to health and to schools. I am advised that those programs are ongoing and are continuing, so that \$17 million is continuing on from this year. They are not in this year’s budget because they are continued on. It is not a new project. They are continuing programs as well as the refugee support program, which is in my portfolio. Both are continuing.

Mr PAKULA — Just so I am clear, it was a four-year strategy, so 8–9, 9–10, 10–11, 11–12. That would suggest, unless you can point me to somewhere else, that that would conclude at the end of 11–12. Is that not the case?

Mr KOTSIRAS — It is not the case. I have been advised that all three — the Refugee Health Nurse Program, the Justice for Refugees Program and the school support for refugees initiatives are continuing. They are ongoing programs.

Mr PAKULA — Funded in the base of those departments.

Mr KOTSIRAS — Yes.

Mr MORRIS — Minister, I also want to ask you about the refugee support program, but more particularly I am wondering if you can indicate to the committee how the program will assist refugees and asylum seekers in their economic and social integration into local communities.

Mr KOTSIRAS — As members will know, Australia accepts about 15 000 refugees a year. Approximately 30 per cent will come to Victoria. On top of that group, you have also got your asylum seekers. Currently there are about 4500 asylum seekers. The commonwealth decided last year to place about 3500 into the community. It is expected that Victoria will get between 30 to 35 per cent of those asylum seekers, so when we talk about refugees we have to be aware of the difference between refugees who are recognised as bona fide refugees and those who are asylum seekers. We will end up with over 1000 asylum seekers. What we have asked from the federal government is to provide us with information as to who they are and where they are placed to make sure that we provide the services to assist them to integrate into the community. We have also asked the Commonwealth that there should be no cost to the Victorian taxpayer. It is their program, it is their problem and they need to provide the funding. We are happy to work with them to ensure that they are integrated and feel they are a part, because 90 per cent of all asylum seekers eventually become refugees and are approved. But having said that, we are also allocating some money — \$0.3 million per year — for the asylum seekers. Even though it is a federal government responsibility, we are putting aside \$0.3 per year as part of our refugee support program to assist asylum seekers.

The other \$1 million is for the refugee action plan. That is, again, to ensure they are able to participate, engage and access existing services that are provided by the commonwealth, the state and local governments. Again, all of this is done in partnership with key stakeholders. I will give you some examples. We work closely with the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre, the Hotham Mission Asylum Seeker Project, the Asylum Seeker Welcome Centre and the Edmund Rice Centre. We are working in partnership with other groups, because these people are human beings, and they just want a fair go. We have to provide them with the opportunities to have a fair go to enable them to participate and be part of the community.

Ms HENNESSY — Minister, if I could just take you to budget paper 3, pages 234 to 235 inclusive, according to the budget you are targeting 2420 multicultural grant approvals in 2012–13 with 12 per cent, or 290 grants, provided to organisations in regional and rural areas. In last year's budget the target was 370 grants to regional and rural multicultural organisations. I was wondering if you could tell the committee why there has been a reduction in the number of target grants to multicultural organisations in rural and regional Victoria.

Mr KOTSIRAS — That is a percentage, whereas you are referring to — I am sorry.

The CHAIR — It is all right. Minister. I know you are very anxious to answer that question. We are very anxious to hear the answer, Minister, so proceed.

Mr KOTSIRAS — You are referring to actual numbers, whereas this year it is a percentage. As you know, about 12 per cent of CALD Victorians live in regional Victoria. The target is 12 per cent. I am confident that percentage will increase; it will be more than 12 per cent, but we are targeting 12 per cent, which is the number of CALD Victorians who live in regional and rural Victoria. So you are not comparing apples with apples — through the Chair, sorry — and you will find that the number will be a bit higher when the actual numbers come through.

Ms HENNESSY — I do just note that even taking 12 per cent of 2420 results in a reduction of those grants, but your evidence, just to confirm, Minister, is that the rationale for that drop is that it reflects the population analogy, in a sense.

Mr KOTSIRAS — Yes, it clarifies and it makes us able to measure the outcomes and also to indicate the share of the grants that are going to regional Victoria, as for the shares that are going to western region compared to the eastern region in terms of needs. It is based on needs.

Mr ANGUS — Minister, I refer you to budget paper 3, page 52, and the subheading 'Multicultural affairs and citizenship' and the point under that 'Increased support for the Victorian Multicultural Commission'. I note that you in fact touched on that in your earlier presentation. Minister, could you please inform the committee in more detail of how the additional funding to the Victorian Multicultural Commission will enhance the functioning of the newly established regional advisory councils?.

Mr KOTSIRAS — As I said, the VMC was re-established in 2011. Part of that was the establishment of eight regional advisory councils. Those eight regional advisory councils are made up of local people who work in the region. It might include local councillors, a small business owner, a teacher or a community representative. They are at the grassroots level, and they are there to provide valuable information to the VMC. We have established eight regional advisory councils, because they are lined up with the eight DHS regions; there will be three metropolitan and five regional. A commissioner from the VMC will chair each of those regional advisory councils. There will be up to 12 plus the chair — up to 13 members per council.

As I said, the aims of these Councils are to work closely with the VMC, to advise the VMC on the settlement needs of migrants, to advise the VMC on citizenship issues and to advocate on behalf of the organisations in that region and of course to promote the advantages of living in a multicultural state. That is why the chair of the VMC approached me and said, 'We would like an extra \$10 000 for each of the Councils plus \$20 000 for administrative costs a total of \$100 000 to ensure that the work of the councils is met'. We decided it was a valid argument, and that is why we provided the extra \$100 000 per year, because the regional advisory councils are the first part of the link in the information chain. They are the grassroots level; they are the eyes and ears of the Commission. The regional advisory councils will provide information to the Commission, which will then provide information to me.

Mr PAKULA — I refer you to your presentation. You might have to assist me. The South Asian Building Fund — I do not have last year's budget papers with me, but I think from recollection the amount budgeted for that fund was \$650 000. Is that right?

Mr KOTSIRAS — Yes.

Mr PAKULA — Was that fully expended in the 11–12 year, or is some of that being carried over to 2012–13?

Mr KOTSIRAS — Some of it has not been expended. The commitments are there, except for one, because one of them — the actual building — is owned by the council and not by the organisation, and we have tried to come to an agreement. We are working on that at the present moment. But sometimes the organisation will require permits. The money has been allocated; it is a matter of whether it is fully spent this year or it is carried over this year.

Mr PAKULA — So it has all been allocated. Just to follow up then, is there somewhere available a list of organisations and/or projects that have received funding through that fund, and if there is not, can it be provided to the committee?

Mr KOTSIRAS — There is. In opposition we put out press releases for each one of those, but I am happy to provide that information to — —

Mr PAKULA — In opposition?

Mr KOTSIRAS — In opposition; it was a commitment that we made prior to the last election, so all the names and the amounts were out in the open.

Mr PAKULA — If you could just provide the committee with the detail; thank you.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Minister — on notice.

Mr O'BRIEN — Thank you, Minister, for your presentation. I was wondering if I could take you to budget paper 3, page 235, and the performance measures there. In relation to the cultural precinct enhancement grants, could you please provide details of the cultural precinct enhancement grants over the next few years as mentioned in budget paper 3 at page 235?

Mr KOTSIRAS — This program was initiated by the previous government. It was a \$12 million program. This is on top of the \$10 million that was allocated prior to this. Six million dollars was spent by the previous government, which leaves another 6 million dollars to be spent in the next two years, so 3 million will be spent in 2012–13 and the rest will be spent in 2013–2014. This is about assisting organisations to cater for their members, so it provides money to change the carpet, air conditioning, heating — just small grants. Some could be up to \$1 million, as the previous government gave, but these are normally \$100 000 to \$200 000 grants to assist organisations. If I just take an example, we gave the Jewish library close to \$1 million of a \$2 million project.

Can I also say that of this \$6 million we have already invested, we have received back about \$13 million. Two weeks ago I opened the Hindu Cultural and Heritage Centre in Carrum Downs. We provided \$1 million. The total project is about \$7.4 million, so the organisation had to raise money themselves and also borrow from the bank. I think it is a good investment because all of Victoria benefits. It is open to the public; anyone can go in and use the facility. This program has worked well and will continue to service the needs of all Victorians.

Ms HENNESSY — Minister, if I could just refer you to budget paper 3, page 235, according to the budget the total output for multiculturalism increased by 2.2 million, in part due to additional funding provided to the Victorian Multicultural Commission to support the operation of the regional advisory councils. Can you just detail what these additional funds were for?

Mr KOTSIRAS — This is \$100 000 per year. The Chair requested additional funds for the regional councils, and as I advised last year if the Commission was to come to me to ask for additional resources to ensure that they are able to carry out their work, then I would be more than happy to provide that money. They requested \$10 000 per council and \$20 000 for administrative costs, which is \$100 000 per year, which we have

allocated in this year's budget. So it is \$100 000 for the regional advisory councils to carry out their work to assist the VMC to ensure that newly arrived migrants are able to integrate and be effective members of the community.

Ms HENNESSY — So your evidence is that that \$10 000 is to be expended on administrative costs? I note that councils struggle to find people to be members of some of the regional advisory councils, so the \$10 000 at the request of the chair was for each regional advisory council for the purposes of administration; is that your evidence?

Mr KOTSIRAS — The \$20 000 is for the administrative cost. There are eight regional councils. They each get \$10 000 to be used by the regional council.

Ms HENNESSY — For what purpose?

Mr KOTSIRAS — One of the things I have asked them is to ensure that they meet throughout the region. I do not expect them, for example, to have all their meetings in Geelong; I expect them to move around the region. So that \$10 000 will go towards meeting that need.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Minister, for those six separate answers to the six separate questions from Ms Hennessy. Minister, in your presentation you refer to the Unity through Partnerships program, and you had previously committed 1.1 million for this program. I am presuming that there has been an opportunity for some evaluation in relation to the effectiveness. Could you advise the committee on how effective the program is in bringing communities together?

Mr KOTSIRAS — Thank you, Chair. Can I say this is one of the best programs we have initiated. It is \$1.1 million. But the difference between this program and many of the other programs is this program actually brings communities together. While the ethno-specific events and functions are still taking place and groups can apply for money to go towards their ethno-specific groups, if they agree to come together to celebrate their differences and also show that they are all Victorians and all Australians, then they are able to apply under this program for up to \$100 000. So it is very important that this government sees the concept of coming together, celebrating differences and understanding that we are all residents in Victoria and all Australians as part of this program. For example, earlier this year we had an Enosi festival at Federation Square which included the Greek community, the Lebanese community and the Turkish community. It was a wonderful event. It showcased how young Victorians can come together and hold hands and dance. Yes, there are differences, but here in Victoria we are united by the fact that we respect each other and we are able to live in peace and harmony with each other. It was a wonderful event.

We also had the Hepburn Springs Swiss/Italian Festa. The multicultural arts festival at Princes Pier again was all about showcasing the many migrants that arrived at Station Pier and Princes Pier, and it brought the different groups together to say, 'We can do it, we are all Victorians'. I think that is the highlight of this particular program. It is a wonderful program. Unfortunately we get more applications than we have got money for, but I am hoping that Victoria continues to grow and prosper as a result of this program. I do know that New South Wales is looking at this program to perhaps implement it in New South Wales.

Mr PAKULA — Minister, I want to ask you about something that you certainly mentioned last year, and I cannot recall if you mentioned it during the presentation — the Victorian diversity employment awards. I am interested in whether you have got any information about how many of those awards have been issued over the last financial year and to whom.

Mr KOTSIRAS — I do not have the list with me, but I think they were tabled in Parliament as a result of the VMC's report to the Parliament.

Mr PAKULA — That goes back to when?

Mr KOTSIRAS — For the last financial year.

Mr PAKULA — That would be the 10–11?

Mr KOTSIRAS — Yes.

Mr PAKULA — But 11–12?

Mr KOTSIRAS — I am happy to provide you with that information.

Mr PAKULA — Okay, thanks.

Mr MORRIS — In passing I note the absence of the shadow minister from the gallery too. I think attendances have been pretty good, but it is obviously a quiet afternoon.

The CHAIR — Mr Morris, as reluctant as I am, I do need to make the observation that it is inappropriate to refer to the gallery in these proceedings.

Mr PAKULA — I think he was talking about the shadow Minister for Finance, not the gallery — the absence of Mr Scott. Is that the point you were making?

Mr MORRIS — No, I was not.

Ms HENNESSY — Who were you talking about?

The CHAIR — We do not need a conversation. Move on, please, Mr Morris.

Ms HENNESSY — I could not hear a word you said, Mr Morris, if it will make you feel a lot better.

The CHAIR — I did, and I have admonished Mr Morris for referring to the gallery, and he will not, I presume, do it again.

Mr MORRIS — Minister, budget paper 3, page 235. The second performance measure on that page relates to the government's rights and responsibilities seminars, and I think you referred to that in your introductory remarks. Can you indicate to the committee how these seminars are assisting newly arrived migrants and where they are being held?

Mr KOTSIRAS — As I said earlier, I believe that all Victorians have got rights. Every Victorian should have equal rights, but they have also got responsibilities, and that is especially true for newly arrived migrants. You cannot have one and not the other. We thought it was appropriate that we present information to newly arrived migrants and refugees about their rights and responsibilities. We worked closely with the Department of Justice, with consumer affairs, with Victoria Police, with VicRoads, with Victorian equal opportunity and human rights, and we have allocated \$800 000 over the next three years to provide free seminars which talk about laws, our legal system, Parliament, volunteerism, safe driving, employment, family, financial management, to name just a few topics.

Each region is different, so one of the roles of the VMC and the office of multicultural affairs was to visit all the regions and to find out exactly what the issues are and to target those groups. The seminars were free. In actual fact they were open to any Victorian. We advertised, and people were able to turn up and find out about government services to assist them in doing their financial management, safe driving and to be active and feel part of Victoria.

Ms HENNESSY — In relation to budget paper 3, page 235, according to the budget you have changed the former performance measure entitled 'Community satisfaction with Celebrate our Cultural Diversity Week events' and there is a new performance measure 'Attendance at Cultural Diversity Week flagship event, Viva Victoria'. I was wondering whether you could tell me what the community satisfaction with Celebrate our Cultural Diversity Week events was in 2011 and 2012.

Mr KOTSIRAS — Can I again say that the changes that have been made have been made to clarify and to better reflect the output and to be able to actually measure the performances. That particular week has been very successful for a number of years. From the Saturday to the following Sunday there are over 200 events right across Victoria which involve local schools, local councils, local organisations who come together to celebrate their diversity. It is very popular, and it has worked well for many, many years.

Ms HENNESSY — Minister, I was wondering how you were intending to measure attendance over future years.

Mr KOTSIRAS — We look at the number of organisations that take part and we look back at previous years under the previous government and we relate that back to those years to ensure that we end up with a similar method and record the maximum number.

Mr ANGUS — Minister, I refer you to budget paper 3, pages 234 and 235 as well, and I would like to in fact follow up on Ms Hennessy's previous question in relation to VMC's Cultural Diversity Week. I wonder if you could outline to the committee, underneath the outputs and deliverables there, the expected benefits of this week and how it in fact promotes social cohesion.

Mr KOTSIRAS — Cultural Diversity Week is about engaging the community and bringing communities together. It is all about learning from each other through different mediums whether that be food, music, plays or films. It is about bringing and showcasing our differences, and so each year the VMC works closely with local councils, local schools, with the community and with business organisations to ensure that this Cultural Diversity Week is very active in promoting our differences but also the fact that we are very similar.

In 2012 there were approximately 200 events that were held over the seven days throughout Victoria. Again, it included festivals and theatre sessions in metropolitan Melbourne and also in regional Victoria, and of course the Premier's gala dinner, where we had over 1400 people attending. There were people on the waiting list — about 400 to 500. It was a wonderful event. Of course we had the Viva Victoria event at Federation Square on 25 March. It comprised many cultures coming together. This is about showcasing to people who might not experience the richness of our cultural diversity. It is about going out to the community and showing that we can live and work together as Victorians, and that is what the aim of Cultural Diversity Week is all about. My desire is next year to try to bring in people who might not have experienced this this year, so always striving to encourage others to see, to feel and to experience the richness of our cultural diversity.

Mr PAKULA — Minister, I have just got a question about the discontinued performance measure 'Metropolitan grants approved', which is on page 362 of BP 3. In 2010–11 the actual number was 2578; in 11–12 it was 2400. That was the target and the actual and the expected outcome is 2100, which is a fair bit lower than both the 2010–11 actual and the target. The explanation refers to the fact that the average allocation per grant has increased, therefore reducing the total number of metropolitan grants allocated. I suppose I am interested in two things: one is why the quantum of the grants — the actual amount being granted — has gone up, and what is the percentage increase in the average grant that would lead to a reduction in the total number of grants given out.

Mr KOTSIRAS — You are looking at page — —

Mr PAKULA — Page 362, 'Metropolitan grants approved'. It was 2578 down to 2400 down to 2100 — at the bottom of the page.

Mr KOTSIRAS — Okay.

Mr PAKULA — And the explanation is that the average allocation per grant has increased. I am interested in why the grants are getting bigger and how much bigger they are getting.

Mr KOTSIRAS — The grants change from year to year. We try to ensure that we provide grants to meet the needs of different organisations. Some organisations will increase in membership and therefore will request a bigger slice of the pie. Others have become independent and are at the stage where they do not submit on their application. We have tried to ensure that it is balanced, we try to ensure that it is needs-based and we try to ensure that the money is well spent. Funding for western region, for example, was \$1.9 million and eastern region was \$600 000, simply because the need in western region is greater than the need in eastern region. So it is based on need and it is based on what the communities have requested and sought. It will change from year to year, but the money is the same. The amount of money is the same.

Mr PAKULA — I appreciate that the amount of money is the same, but the total number of grants has dropped. I understand what you are saying about some areas, but the average has gone up. I suppose I am just curious as to why that is. But I am assuming that, like some of the other grants we talked about, these grants are identified in the annual report, are they?

Mr KOTSIRAS — These grants are — —

Mr PAKULA — Yes.

The CHAIR — Minister, proceed.

Mr KOTSIRAS — These grants are in the annual report. But you will find that some of the organisations might apply to another department, because we have tried to ensure that all departments are relevant to the needs of all Victorians. If we have provided an amount for a sporting club, they might have applied to the department of sport and recreation to receive that money. We are trying to say, ‘You need also to apply to departments which are relevant’ and also putting pressure on the departments to be relevant. Again, the money has not changed in terms of the total amount; it is still the same amount. Some have increased, some have decreased, some are receiving the money from other departments. But the total list in the office of multicultural affairs is listed in our annual report, which is tabled in Parliament.

Mr O’BRIEN — I just refer briefly to your presentation where one of the achievements was the establishment of the eight regional advisory councils across Victoria. I also refer to budget paper 3, page 235, and also to some of the answers you gave to Ms Hennessy’s question and to Mr Angus where you have, in relation to the proportion of grants approved which are provided to organisations in regional and rural areas, a target of 12. I would just like to ask you, Minister: what programs in your portfolio responsibilities focus specifically on Victorians from a culturally and linguistically diverse background who are living in the wonderful regional and rural areas of Victoria?

Mr KOTSIRAS — As I said earlier, 12 per cent of all CALD Victorians live in regional Victoria, so we have to ensure that at least 12 per cent of funding goes to regional Victoria to meet their needs. As I said earlier, you will find that some will increase, and I am sure that the 12 per cent target will be higher than just the 12 per cent. But there are a number of programs which look after the interests of Victorians not only in metropolitan Melbourne but also in regional Victoria. The community grants program, which is a \$5.6 million program, also funds a large number of projects and programs in regional Victoria.

With promoting community harmony, which is another \$2 million initiative, there are again a number of programs and projects in regional Victoria. There is the refugee action program, as was said earlier: there are many refugees who have decided to settle in regional Victoria, so there is money there to assist them. We are working in partnership with Latrobe City Council, with Mallee Family Care and with the Ethnic Council of Shepparton, to name a few, to ensure that the needs of new migrants in regional Victoria are met. Of course, as I said earlier, we have the rights and responsibilities seminars, which again go across the state in metropolitan and regional Victoria. The budget is \$21.4 million, and a large portion of that is to meet the needs of newly arrived migrants and refugees who have decided to live in regional Victoria.

Ms HENNESSY — Minister, in relation to budget paper 3, page 51, and noting the department’s savings targets, can you tell us if there are any job cuts that are going to occur at the VMC as a result of those savings targets?

Mr KOTSIRAS — Thank you very much for the question. Can I say that those who know me will know I am passionate about the programs and the money that is allocated to particular groups and organisations and to newly arrived migrants and refugees. I can assure you that no front-line person or front-line individual who is providing a service to their communities will lose their job or leave. All the programs that are in this budget will be implemented: \$21.4 million in total. In terms of the numbers, as the member might know, my office is a small part of DPC. Those discussions are taking place, but the one thing I will say is that this will not interfere with the work of the VMC. The VMC will be provided with enough resources and staff to carry out its duty. If not, I am sure the VMC members themselves will make an issue of this, because I am very passionate about the work that the VMC does.

Ms HENNESSY — Minister, we are very passionate about all jobs in the Victorian public service. I was just wondering, in light of your answer, is it true then to say that your evidence is that any person employed specifically to deal with a particular ethnic group — you know, ethnic groups that have been allocated staff — there will be absolutely no cut whatsoever to any of those employees? Is it your evidence that the FTE — —

Mr KOTSIRAS — I assume that Ms Hennessy is referring to VMC.

Ms HENNESSY — Yes.

Mr KOTSIRAS — As I said earlier, the resources and staffing of VMC will ensure that they are able to carry out their duties as they are required. They will make sure that they will meet the needs of all Victorians and all newly arrived migrants to ensure that they can integrate, engage and be part of the community. Services, budget and money will not be cut.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Minister, for such a definite response. I indicate that we have time for just one more question, and I think that will be from me. I am referring to BP 3, page 235, which refers to Victorian community grants. Minister, would you please outline for the committee the various Victorian community grants administered by your department?

Mr KOTSIRAS — All the programs in my portfolio are about providing a fair go and encouraging newly arrived migrants to have a go — so ‘a fair go’ and ‘have a go’. That is the aim, because we all want people to be able to feel at home, engage and be part of the community. Every project, every program, every initiative and every partnership that we undertake is about making sure that newly arrived migrants feel part of this community but also making sure that our established communities are also looked after. They also have their special needs. As members would know, as you get older you tend to revert back to your native language and your dietary needs. It is important that we do not forget those established communities; they have been here for many, many years. Over 70 per cent of the budget goes to helping people to be part and feel part of the community.

We have a number of programs, as we have outlined during the last hour. There are the Promoting Harmony grants and the organisational support grants. They are small grants, maybe \$500 or \$1000, but it goes a long way to help a senior group to perhaps hire a bus to visit Parliament or to hire a bus and go to Sovereign Hill. Again, they are small amounts, but they mean a lot to those groups. We have the strengthening communities grants and the Unity Through Partnerships grants, which I outlined before — the \$1.1 million that was outlined in terms of bringing groups together to showcase their differences. We have the multicultural events and festivals, again to showcase the uniqueness and the differences in the cultures. We have the cultural precincts: \$10 million initially and now \$12 million. On top of that we also had the Indian infrastructure fund to assist with temples and cultural centres.

All this is about participation, engagement and feeling at home. I would like to know from participants and from the VMC in particular — because there are 12 hardworking members on the Commission who are sincere and passionate about the work that they have to do — if any of these programs are not working. If they are not working, then I encourage them, when they go around talking to people, to advise us of that, and we will change and alter them. But the money allocated will be available to particular groups, whether under these grants or under a different name. So again the aim is a fair go and to encourage Victorians to have a go. Many migrants came here after the war, all worked hard and never once did they put out their hands. They always put up their hands to volunteer and to build, and they assisted in building Victoria. We have to give the same opportunity to newly arrived migrants. I think if we treat them as human beings, then perhaps they too will feel part of and contribute in a positive way to the future of this state.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Minister. This brings to an end the consideration of budget estimates for the multicultural affairs and citizenship portfolio. I thank the minister and the departmental officers for their attendance today, and I note that we have a question on notice.

Mr KOTSIRAS — Two.

The CHAIR — Two. We will write to you, Minister, and request that you respond within 21 days. Thank you. That concludes the hearing.

Committee adjourned.