

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the 2022-23 Budget Estimates

Melbourne—Tuesday, 17 May 2022

MEMBERS

Ms Lizzie Blandthorn—Chair

Mr Danny O'Brien—Deputy Chair

Mr Rodney Barton

Mr Sam Hibbins

Mr Gary Maas

Mrs Beverley McArthur

Mr James Newbury

Ms Pauline Richards

Mr Tim Richardson

Ms Nina Taylor

WITNESSES

Ms Jaala Pulford MLC, Minister for Employment,

Mr Simon Phemister, Secretary, and

Ms Lisa Buckingham, Deputy Secretary, Jobs Victoria, Secure Work and Inclusion Group, Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions.

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

I ask that mobile telephones please be turned to silent.

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

On behalf of the Parliament, the committee is conducting this Inquiry into the 2022–23 Budget Estimates. The committee's aim is to scrutinise public administration and finance to improve outcomes for the Victorian community.

I advise that all evidence taken by the committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. However, comments repeated outside this hearing may not be protected by this privilege.

Witnesses will be provided with a proof version of the transcript to check. Verified transcripts, presentations and handouts will be placed on the committee's website.

We welcome Minister Pulford in the first instance for the employment portfolio. We invite you to make a short presentation. This will be followed by questions from the committee. Thank you.

Visual presentation.

Ms PULFORD: Great. Thanks very much, and it is good to be here with you all again. I am joined by the Secretary of my department and the Deputy Secretary with responsibility for the employment portfolio among her duties—Simon Phemister and Lisa Buckingham. It is my real pleasure to give you some introductory comments around the employment portfolio.

Starting with the state of employment and unemployment in Victoria, current statewide unemployment is 4 per cent and in regional Victoria it is 3.2. This is quite a significant improvement from the 6.7 per cent unemployment in regional Victoria the government inherited in 2014.

The challenges of the employment portfolio have inverted in the last two years since I took on this portfolio. In 2020 the pandemic was expected to result in very high rates of joblessness, and many commentators were anticipating double-digit unemployment. That has not occurred, though there are still areas of disadvantage—for example, in youth unemployment, in some community groups and in some particular geographical regions where the impacts of the pandemic have been most acute. The unexpected challenge has been really quite acute labour shortages, and so that has in recent months become an increasingly important focus for our Jobs Victoria services.

Jobs Victoria is making a real difference to Victorians in need. I just wanted to share with you one of our Jobs Victoria advocates, Anh Dam, and her extraordinary work. She is the Australian Vietnamese Women's Association Jobs Vic advocate, based in Braybrook. I think the people are working on the slide things. In just six months Anh has assisted more than 500 people in looking for work.

The CHAIR: Sorry to interrupt you, Minister. Committee members do have the presentation in an email if they want to open their email to follow along while the secretariat is addressing that issue.

Ms PULFORD: Anh has assisted more than 500 people looking for work, providing practical resources, guidance, referrals, language services and emotional support. Her dedication is highlighted by the life-changing support she provided. I just want to share with the committee a story of 50-year-old Tao—not her real name—

recently divorced and recovering from a stroke, who had been forced to close her acupuncture therapy business, losing her only source of income and indeed her home. Anh referred Tao to Centrelink's Sunshine MatchWorks, a local GP and the Salvation Army, making all her appointments due to Tao's limited English and reminding her prior to each appointment. After a few weeks Tao started in a new part-time job at the Lovisa factory in Derrimut and was about to move into a property in Braybrook. Anh contacted the rental agent to arrange utility connection and ensure that the lease conditions were favourable.

Jobs Victoria is also making it easier for small businesses faced with labour shortages. I had the recent pleasure of meeting Olivia, the owner of Ohana Hairdressing. Olivia is a recognised leader in her industry and was awarded 2014 Salon Manager of the Year and 2015 Colour Technician of the Year, but like many in the industry Olivia was facing real difficulty finding staff. With support from Jobs Victoria, Olivia hired Chiara, as an apprentice. Chiara is 26 years old. She had attempted to complete a hairdressing apprenticeship five years earlier but had had to cease due to an injury. She then worked in retail for a bit, but had found herself, due to COVID and other challenges, back in a state of unemployment in recent years. Chiara is very excited to be working back in her preferred industry and picking up the training that she had started some years earlier. She has been wonderfully supported and has relished the support and guidance from the program mentor.

Just in terms of new initiatives, the budget provides \$10 million to establish a series of short courses to further address acute skills shortages in priority areas, and those priority areas will be identified by work with industry, TAFEs and dual-sector universities. It also provides \$760 000 to support delivery of the Aboriginal procurement targets, social procurement framework and social enterprise strategy. There is funding also to extend the government's partnership with the Kinaway chamber of commerce to help government departments meet our 1 per cent Aboriginal procurement target. There are also resources to further grow our social enterprise sector through social impact measurement and impact investment opportunities for full-scale impact and business growth.

Supporting the growth of the Aboriginal business sector is a really important priority for me and for the work that we all do in this portfolio. Earlier this year I had the great privilege of joining Chris Couzens, the Member for Geelong, to announce \$850 000 in funding to Ngarrimili to establish a cultural hub at Westfield Geelong for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The cultural hub will take the form of a retail shopfront and features a cafe for training and employment opportunities. It will serve as a co-working space for Aboriginal people where they can grow their businesses but also seek employment assistance.

Just in closing if I could acknowledge the traditional owners of country across Victoria. We work very closely with traditional owners and Aboriginal community members and community leaders in achieving our employment portfolio objectives. I would also just, I guess, like to recognise that today is the International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia, Interphobia and Transphobia. A recent report the department provided to me on the different groups of people in the community shows us that our LGBTIQ+ community members in Victoria do experience higher rates of unemployment and lower rates of employment than the broader community. I have asked Jobs Victoria to do some work with the Pride Centre to identify some of the causes of this and to seek to develop with the Pride Centre some potential remedies and interventions where we can make a difference for members of that community, which seems timely to mention on this day that is marked around the world. So happy to take any of your questions.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. Deputy Chair.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Thank you, Chair, and welcome, Minister. I cannot begin without also acknowledging the inverse, as you said, of the employment portfolio in that finding staff is just an issue at the moment; it is not creating jobs, but I will let my colleagues perhaps ask a few questions on that. Can I just begin with a question about Working for Victoria? Are you able to advise what percentage of Victorians employed under Working for Victoria still have a job today?

Ms PULFORD: I do not have that information immediately to hand. I can provide you with no shortage of stories of people that I have met, of employers that have gone on to create ongoing positions, of people that have left their Jobs Victoria funded role to go into a substantive position with their host employer or with another, but those positions were not designed to be ongoing. There were designed, and I think we talked about this last time, to be of a limited period given the nature of their full wage subsidy. Typically they were six months; there were some that were shorter—not many—and there were some that were longer, but

overwhelmingly they were six-month transition roles for people. Those things will be reconciled by the end of this financial year.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Okay. If you could provide whatever information you have on hand at the moment on notice, that would be good. Secretary, a question for you: just the sick pay guarantee on page 73 of budget paper 3, it is a two-year pilot, but there is \$32.9 million in the current financial year. What is that money for?

Mr PHEMISTER: Chair, I ask for your guidance. I am not quite sure how to answer. I am sitting with Minister Stitt in another session. That falls under Minister Stitt's portfolio, Mr O'Brien, not Minister Pulford's. Sorry.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Right. My apologies. Can I go to the \$10 million training program that you had in the slide: is it for people already in a job or people looking for work?

Ms PULFORD: This is very much an initiative led by the Victorian chamber and RMIT, who have been working with the Victorian Skills Authority to present to government for our consideration a proposal that is certainly very complementary with any number of other initiatives that the government has underway to respond to skills shortages, but it is around establishing short courses to deal with those critical skill sets that are lacking in the labour market at the moment and to provide participants with employment pathways. So, yes, the target is people that are not in work and to help them into work via those short courses for a really quick response to where the shortages are most acute. We spend a lot of time these days, as distinct from this time last year when I saw you all, on this issue. Whether it is hospitality, whether it is tourism, whether it is you name it—community services—there are less people than I think the public sector, the private sector and the community sector alike would like to have available for work. That is why we are working so hard to grow participation, respond to underemployment and unemployment and support people who might not have ever been in work before to make a start.

Mr D O'BRIEN: How many people is that expected to assist?

Ms PULFORD: That program is still being designed. It does not have a specific job number target as the Jobs Victoria program has—

Mr D O'BRIEN: No, a training number target, I mean. How many people will actually go through the training?

Ms PULFORD: We will be able to provide further details on that as the program is further designed and developed, but the design of that will be developed in partnership between my department, RMIT and the Victorian chamber. While supporting the greatest number of people to deal with the greatest number of shortages is important, there are also areas where shortages are more acute than others, so different interventions will be required for different industries.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Have you identified yet what those areas of need are?

Ms PULFORD: Yes.

Mr D O'BRIEN: We all know that they are across the board.

Ms PULFORD: They are. They really are. Again, the design of this will be finalised and refined and we will be able to provide updates to industry and to potential participants as that occurs now that the funding has been secured.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Okay. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Deputy Chair. Mr Maas.

Mr MAAS: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Minister, for your appearance this afternoon. If I could take you to Jobs Victoria services, budget paper 3, a reference at page 252, on the table there, I was hoping that you would be able to give PAEC an update on the implementation of the Jobs Victoria initiative.

Ms PULFORD: Yes. It has been quite the journey really, and if I could take a moment to give to Ms Buckingham's team a shout-out for really extraordinary design and delivery of a program that has been put together in the most extraordinary of times. Danny asked about Working for Victoria. At the time Working for Victoria was established a lot of people were using the expression 'Build the plane while we're flying it', and I think that was certainly what the second half of 2020 felt like in a whole lot of different regards.

Jobs Victoria is an evolution. I think of it as sort of chapter 3 of this story. The government has for quite a number of years now been developing very specialist employment services that have been very targeted and very effective but small. Then Working for Victoria in the pandemic created an imperative to do something at scale, and Jobs Victoria is really taking the best of those very small and specialised services that have been proven to be effective in helping people really locked out of the labour market into work, and into work successfully, with scale. So that is really where we are now. The changes that have happened in the labour market through this period have been quite extraordinary. Obviously we have had the winter lockdowns and restrictions from last year, and then in February we had omicron and a whole lot of people chose to stay home even though the restrictions were not any longer requiring it. Again, data in time will bear this out, and it is changing now, but we have anecdotal evidence from industry but also from our Jobs Vic providers around a reticence earlier in this year for people to commit to employing or to taking a position. That thankfully is changing, but that was a real feature of where we were at in around March of this year.

The rollout and operation of the face-to-face elements of the service have, you would be unsurprised to know, been impacted by the restrictions through particularly the first half of this financial year, but they are all at absolutely full tilt now, and they are on high demand. Again I would encourage all of you in your discussions with people from different industries, different sectors and local chambers in your travels and with people looking for work and people who know people looking for work—I have got a great story I might find the opportunity to share with you that we have been working on with Pauline—I just encourage people to use this service, because it is up and running at sort of full fly now.

Mr MAAS: Terrific. Thank you. The line item also refers to advocates and mentors. I understand they are new roles. How have they operated in the past 12 months?

Ms PULFORD: The work of mentors has been an approved frontline type of work that has been permitted to continue in large part or overwhelmingly throughout, and the same for the federal government job service providers. We have tried not to use the term 'essential service' so as to not offend all of the other essential services, but they have been a service that has been permitted to work throughout. The advocates, with the sort of deep community engagement nature of their work, to go and find people and talk to people in the community in their language, in their suburb or in their town about prospective work opportunities and connections into the program—that has been harder, but it is not anymore. They are all on board. It is a total workforce across the mentors and the advocates and then a smaller group but a really important group of careers counsellors for those that need a lighter touch level of support. The total workforce across the program is a bit over 600 people.

Mr MAAS: Great. Thanks for your time.

Ms PULFORD: No worries.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Maas. Mr Barton.

Mr BARTON: Minister and team, good afternoon. Minister, I have probably mentioned previously that commercial passenger drivers are some of the most poorly paid and underemployed workers in the state. They have seen their livelihoods decimated by the unequal playing field created by rideshare. These are vulnerable members of the community, many with families to support, and many need Victorian government assistance. In reference to Jobs Victoria, when it comes to the funding allocated to the Jobs Victoria fund, will any of the resources be set aside to specifically target vulnerable transport workers who face an incredibly and increasingly volatile workplace?

Ms PULFORD: Thank you, Rod, for your question. Mrs McArthur and Ms Taylor will appreciate that Mr Barton and I do lots of questions and answers about the people that he represents in this place and advocates for on a regular basis, so this will not be a surprising line of inquiry for all of us from the upper house. But, Rod, as you know, I have great regard for your advocacy and your efforts on behalf of your people.

In terms of the wage subsidy, businesses that employ people and are taking somebody on that can meet the criterion of being a vulnerable person seeking work are eligible already, not by industry but by virtue of who they are employing. So it works that way rather than the other way around, if that makes sense—a lot. We have been a little surprised as the program has been rolled out to see the extent to which this has been embraced by small and very small businesses. I think when we were originally designing the program we had sort of envisaged large and medium-sized employers taking on groups of people. A very large proportion of the wage subsidy roles have been taken up by very small businesses that are taking on one person or two. So if you have drivers, if you have people who have a few vehicles and who have employees, then as long as they can meet our thresholds for secure and sustainable ongoing employment—which I know can be challenging in that industry—then they would be eligible, because the program is what we like to call sector neutral. So public sector, private sector, community sector—we do not mind. We are just all about getting people into work where the demand is and where the opportunities are for people.

In terms of people who may have been driving taxis who are not any longer receiving the kind of income that they need to support themselves and their families, then the Jobs Victoria service is available to them to look for additional work or to look for new work.

Mr BARTON: So there are opportunities for part-time work?

Ms PULFORD: Yes, there are. The system is designed to bias permanent and ongoing work, so people would be able to transition from casual work to permanent work, from part-time work to full-time work and from not so much work to more work. It is really all about secure work and more hours. But we were certainly very, very conscious in the design that we did not want to blow away the opportunity for people who were not seeking full-time work, because of course lots of people for lots of reasons are not—whether it is a question of other commitments, including caring commitments, perhaps another job or perhaps a business that they are running that they want to continue to have a hand in. So on both sides of the equation, yes—the answer is yes.

Mr BARTON: Thank you, Minister. Just on another little project that I have been involved with, during the homelessness inquiry we heard that women aged over 55 are the fastest growing cohort of homeless people in Victoria. These women are at greater risk due to a number of factors, including taking time out of the workforce to care for family or working part-time or casually throughout their lives, which has a severe impact on their superannuation. On top of this, they are subject to age discrimination in the workforce. What programs or initiatives in this budget specifically focus on helping this vulnerable cohort of women find safe and secure employment?

Ms PULFORD: Okay. Thanks. I am conscious of time, so I am not sure if I will have the opportunity to pick this up. But the program really runs at a 60-40 ratio, women to men, again by design, because that is where the pandemic impacts were most acute. The jobs advocates and jobs mentor services are very practised at connecting people to other services and supports. The example I gave in the introduction about making sure that somebody has secure housing to support their ability to manage secure employment is very important. We also—with your forbearance, if I could just finish this sentence, Chair—have a number of providers who work particularly with women who have experience of family violence. Obviously there is a very strong correlation there. But perhaps you and I could take this up offline another time.

Mr BARTON: Thank you, Minister.

Ms PULFORD: Thanks, Rod.

The CHAIR: Ms Richards.

Ms RICHARDS: Thank you, Minister, for your time here, and for your officials' time as well. I would just like to continue on and explore a little bit more some of what Mr Maas was discussing with you earlier. It is the same budget paper reference, budget paper 3, page 254. I would like to ask a little bit more about the way that the pandemic has impacted on delivery and implementation of the Jobs Victoria initiative.

Ms PULFORD: Yes. Thanks, Pauline. The budget papers go to this. Some of the initiatives, and I do not think anyone would be particularly surprised to learn this, had started their rollout a bit like firing a rocket, and then because of restrictions—because people were being taken on in roles that required them to be not at home when the restrictions were requiring them to be at home—have had delayed or deferred starts. Those contracts

have indeed been managed throughout so that our objective of making sure that people have—whether it is six months or 12 months—minimum work as part of the terms of their involvement in the program, be it an employer or employee. The team have really case managed them through, and the mentoring and careers counselling, a lot of that was still able to be done remotely, but the mentors' and advocates' roles are now well and truly back up to speed. The extent to which they had fallen behind what we would have ideally wanted targets to have been relative to the 10 000 people over the life of the program—they are now well and truly tracking to chase down any shortfall.

Ms RICHARDS: Thanks, Minister. Again, like others on this committee, I would like to explore a little bit more how Jobs Victoria is supporting businesses and industries experiencing workforce shortages. You have heard before that it is something that is important I think to many of us and certainly something that is important to so many of our businesses.

Ms PULFORD: Yes, yes, yes. I have this lovely list in tiny mouse font, so hang on a sec. What we refer to internally as the innovation stream of the jobs fund is where we are working with particular areas of workforce shortage when they become known to us through industry stakeholders or the data just makes it very clear that there is a particular need to fill a gap. The jobs fund has really kind of got two hemispheres. You have got the part with the wage subsidy program and the wraparound supports and the sort of individual-to-business matchmaking, and the innovation stream is sort of bigger groups. So just to give you some examples, there is a 275-job partnership through Box Hill TAFE hair, beauty and hospitality. There is also a 150-job project that North Link is coordinating for caravan manufacturing, overwhelmingly operating in the northern suburbs, and if none of you have been to visit one of those amazing caravan manufacturers, you have got to see these machines for them to be believed—state-of-the-art, two-year waiting lists, beautiful, gorgeous things, but with a massive workforce shortage.

There is a program with LGPro for the local government sector, which is obviously short in getting particular skills; and a government sector project with the forest and fire folks at DELWP around fire management—there are 50 people there. I am conscious of time. The swimming teachers, though—you will have all heard from the swimming teachers and the small swim schools that are everywhere. Every town has a swimming school, every suburb has a swimming school; they are so, so many of these organisations. Because they were not able to teach, all their staff went elsewhere, and then they were able to reopen and they were delighted to be reopened and bring back all these kids and make sure kids were safe in the water and all those things and were able to enjoy things like scuba-diving. So we worked with the Australian Swimming Coaches and Teachers Association. That program is for 280 jobs over two years in swimming instructing across Melbourne and regional Victoria. That was lovely. And there are a whole lot of other examples, including with Homes Victoria and other industry groups, and we have a pipeline of others in development. So again I would encourage members of the committee, if you are aware of industry groups for whom there are particularly acute problems—we will work with them and design something bespoke for their needs. Hospo and tourism are obviously the latest priorities that we have been working on.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury.

Mr NEWBURY: Thank you. While you are on Jobs Victoria, Minister, have you got any global figures in terms of businesses that have been assisted, people that have been assisted?

Ms PULFORD: Hang on, let me find those. Yes. So 1500 businesses have been supported through the fund, but I have got a couple of other headline numbers if you would like.

Mr NEWBURY: Please.

Ms PULFORD: And I understand you had a question about commercial leases earlier in the day, which I also have the answer for should you like.

Mr NEWBURY: Yes.

Ms PULFORD: But we can come to that later, in small business perhaps. So on access and navigation it is more than 67 000 points of engagement. So that is the hotline, interactions with advocates—like, 55 000 interactions with advocates. Nearly 130 000 people have registered online. Registering online is not compulsory. I know Mr Hibbins might be interested. I know a number of the Greens colleagues have had a

briefing and been interested to know, ‘What of people who do not want to register online for their own reasons?’.

Nearly 30 000 people have received personalised employment services, more than 5500 jobs were subsidised through the Jobs Victoria fund and nearly 13 500 people were supported into secure employment. So we are really operating at quite a scale now. But yes, the purpose and focus have shifted in a way we did not predict.

Mr NEWBURY: You mentioned there had been a delay, and I completely understand that. With that 10 000 number target, for want of a better term, has that delay pushed out your time line to get to that?

Ms PULFORD: No. And, you know, the shifting economic circumstances mean that we are confident we will meet it.

Mr NEWBURY: Yes. Okay. In the same time line?

Ms PULFORD: Yes.

Mr NEWBURY: Yes. Okay. In terms of your 400 000 employment target by 2025, how is that going?

Ms PULFORD: Yes, that is going well. So that is sort of the whole-of-government target that the Treasurer outlined in the jobs plan a couple of budgets ago. And I believe—I do have that number somewhere here—that we are now certainly in excess of 250 000 of those. And again, when that was all articulated, every economist was saying we were looking at some really quite concerning potential economic scarring for particular groups in the community and an economic downturn that would last much longer. But the resilience of the economy has I think been shown to us all, plus of course we have far less in the way of international students and backpackers coming through, and that has displaced employment—well, that has done the opposite of displacing employment; that has left some industries with some real gaps and some real vulnerabilities where they have perhaps had a historical over-reliance on those things, though they are coming back.

Mr NEWBURY: So in relation to that last part you spoke about and also people leaving the state, is the department working on those gaps?

Ms PULFORD: Yes, they are. So you may have touched on this with Minister Pakula earlier in the day, but the federal government—Simon knows this better than I do because of his responsibilities across all of our portfolios—places a cap on how many people we are able to have. I have written to them asking if our cap can be raised. It has been risen a bit and we would like it to be higher, because we could fill those jobs in like about 30 seconds, I reckon. Is that about right?

Mr PHEMISTER: Yes.

Ms PULFORD: Yes.

Mr NEWBURY: The other thing that is worth certainly mentioning is the cohort of women throughout the pandemic who were disproportionately affected, especially women who ran small businesses and were under the GST cap and were having difficulty in terms of funding. Is the department doing any work on that space in terms of really trying to help?

Ms PULFORD: Yes, we are. In terms of the employment services and those small businesses that are perhaps growing to a point now where they are looking to put someone on, some of those businesses are businesses that are accessing the Jobs Vic programs. We do have some programs that we are developing in partnership with some of these groups around microenterprises. It is a really important area, a really important part of our economy, and it is a big, big group of people, and I think you are right to call out that probably the vast majority of them are women.

Mr NEWBURY: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Ms Taylor.

Ms TAYLOR: You have outlined the role of Jobs Victoria in supporting disadvantaged jobseekers into employment and the government’s priority cohorts. Can I refer you to budget paper 3, page 251, specifically

‘Disadvantaged jobseekers who achieve sustainable employment ... with the support of Jobs Victoria Services’, and ask: what is Jobs Victoria doing to support the priority cohorts?

Ms PULFORD: In the subsidy part of the program there are two rates, so there is a \$10 000 subsidy and a \$20 000 subsidy. We have actually made a couple of adjustments, and I guess it might be a bit of a theme of what I am talking to you about with this program, where the program was established anticipating a certain state of economic activity and here we are in something somewhat different. As I recall, I reflected on how we would continue to monitor the changing labour market conditions and adjust as we go, and where we have made some of those adjustments we have announced them, so that is all a matter of the public record.

The priority cohorts in the Jobs Victoria Fund, under the guidelines as they stand now, include women over 45. I am still entirely scarred by one of the discussions I had with my officials very soon after coming into the portfolio. They said to me, ‘For women over 45, if they are out of work for 18 months, the data pretty much tells us they are out of work for good’. Isn’t that horrific? So women aged over 45 have always been absolutely front and centre in our thinking as we have designed this. Jobseekers who are long-term unemployed, of course, as the economy picks up can also be left behind; history tells us that is a real risk. Jobseekers registered with a Jobs Victoria partner, so those that are, say, working with an organisation that is supporting ex-offenders into work or, further to Mr Barton’s question earlier, people who have been experiencing family violence and are working with a service provider—there are a number of specialty providers across different groups. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and people with a disability are, again, groups of people—well, this is not exclusive to Victoria but across Australia—where we know that we have massive underutilisation and a real challenge in terms of providing opportunities into work for so many people. People seeking asylum and refugees—I met an amazing man this morning in Clayton who told me some of his life story and how the program had helped him into work. He had very significant engineering qualifications and had not been able to get them recognised and was working here as an apprentice’s assistant, but he is now being supported to refresh his skills. He is very busy on the Big Build and probably will be for a long time. Newly arrived migrants from non-English-speaking backgrounds and young people under 25, for the same reasons, can just be left behind after an economic downturn, and there is no shortage of data from over the years to show us that they are at-risk groups. Single parents is a group we have added. I am working with Mr Leane and the veterans’ community with returned service people.

Ms TAYLOR: Thank you. Picking up on the issue of youth unemployment, because you did mention there about young people under 25, I am interested in your views on that and any programs Jobs Victoria are working on to assist young people.

Ms PULFORD: Yes. There are a number of programs. Indeed I was with the Premier, Gayle Tierney and Steven Dimopoulos earlier today at the heart hospital site in Clayton, where we were announcing, as part of the Jobs Victoria program, 300 apprenticeships and traineeships for the construction industry—one that is of course, like many, experiencing workforce shortages. They are not exclusively for young people, but they will skew to younger people. Then we have programs to provide entry pathways into a whole lot of different industries, including our own public service and public sector agencies, as well as through a number of different traineeships and programs. We also work very directly with different community groups. I think I have now found my opportunity to talk about the group that Pauline and I have been talking about, a community that gravitates around a particular sporting club in Pauline’s electorate where the parents are particularly interested in better and broader job opportunities for the younger members of their family, and we will be catching up with them with the Jobs Vic advocates in a couple of weeks, I think. I am looking forward to it.

Ms RICHARDS: Yes. It is very exciting. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Mrs McArthur.

Mrs McARTHUR: Thank you, Chair. Minister, I understand you will not comment on the administration of the sick pay guarantee pilot, but I—

Ms PULFORD: Well, I can, but I am not responsible for it, so it would be pretty ill informed, I suspect.

Mrs McARTHUR: Okay. But I do want to raise a related question—as Minister for Employment. On Friday the Treasurer told me that he agrees with the ACTU that all casual employment falls within the definition of insecure work. Do you agree with that definition?

Ms PULFORD: Well, yes, I think so. I mean, work is either secure or insecure. Again, this is not really strictly within my portfolio remit, but the definition of casual work is employment by the hour. Employment by the hour, I would suggest, is pretty insecure.

Mrs McARTHUR: Okay. So then would you therefore support the expansion of the scheme to support these workers, like the sick pay guarantee scheme, to all Victorian casual employees?

Ms PULFORD: Well, if you are asking for an opinion outside of my portfolio area—

Mrs McARTHUR: As the Minister for Employment.

The CHAIR: Mrs McArthur, I think it was made clear both with the preceding minister and previously with the Secretary and this minister that this falls within the responsibilities of Minister Stitt.

Ms PULFORD: What I can say within my portfolio responsibilities is that we have at every possible opportunity in the design of the programs that fall within this portfolio sought to prefer secure employment, so non-casual employment, and there are any number of design features that you will find in the guidelines of the Jobs Victoria Fund and the program that demonstrate that objective.

Mrs McARTHUR: Okay. You have committed \$5.6 million, labelled as ‘supports for on-demand workers’, in the budget. As the Minister for Employment, do you believe that all on-demand workers should be treated as employees?

Ms PULFORD: Again, this falls outside of my portfolio.

Mrs McARTHUR: As the Minister for Employment?

Ms PULFORD: What do you mean by on-demand employees?

The CHAIR: Mrs McArthur, I would suggest that ministers are here to answer questions in relation to the estimates for their own portfolios rather than give opinions on others. If you could relate your questions to the relevant portfolio and the relevant estimates, please.

Ms PULFORD: I certainly support and work closely with people both in this portfolio and in the small business portfolio—work with industry in pursuit of secure employment objectives. I think it is good for business. I think it is obviously good for employees.

Mrs McARTHUR: Thank you, Minister. As employment minister then, you will know about the crippling worker shortage in Victoria, especially in regional Victoria. In fact, as you have outlined, there are various government initiatives in progress to remedy the shortfall. What about the most obvious solution? The shortages are made much worse by the continued and now illogical vaccine mandates your government insists on retaining. Victorians can go and shop, they can eat, they can go to a show, they can even go to a brothel, but they cannot work. This is not just damaging businesses; it is why more than 60 000 people net left the state last year. When are you going to remove this artificial barrier and allow the hospitality, tourism, agriculture, health and education sectors to function properly?

Ms PULFORD: I just do not believe that your assertions there are accurate. There are more people in work now in Victoria than there were in March 2020. The participation rate is up. There is absolutely no empirical evidence to suggest vaccine mandates are compounding workforce shortages, and I think you are also conflating the population data that relates to a whole lot of foreign nationals moving home for the pandemic. Absolutely it is correct to say that there are some industries and some sectors that have been particularly hard-hit by the lack of a traveller/backpacker workforce, and those that have been particularly impacted by the lower numbers of international students, but the data just does not bear out what you are saying.

Mrs McARTHUR: Okay, so you would agree with the minister for industry support that vaccine mandates have a negligible impact on the Victorian workforce then?

Ms PULFORD: Oh, absolutely. Vaccine mandates? Now we are well into the lake area of opinions on other people’s portfolios. But vaccine mandates proved to be an incredibly powerful tool in reopening the Victorian

economy sooner and further, and industry leaders that I have worked with through the last two years are overwhelmingly supportive of them.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. Mr Richardson.

Mr RICHARDSON: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Minister and department officials, for joining us for these hearings today. I want to take you, Minister, to the questions that you were engaging with Ms Taylor on and particularly the breakdown of jobs from the Jobs Victoria wage subsidy that have gone towards priority cohorts. I know you have elaborated on some of the targets and the support that that has provided, but a breakdown for the committee's benefit would be greatly appreciated.

Ms PULFORD: In terms of the way that different groups are supported through the program, you mean?

Mr RICHARDSON: Yes.

Ms PULFORD: Okay. For culturally diverse jobseekers there are 16 specialist mentor services. There are four specialist mentor youth services, and 280 traineeships are being created in the Victorian public sector. In youth corrections and justice—and I give my colleague Natalie Hutchins a shout-out here for her great collegiality and support in this—there are three specialist mentor services supporting ex-offenders and justice clients. There is a program supporting people exiting Parkville College and students at Parkville College as well. It is early days in this program, but I think we can look forward to very, very special things coming from there. There are four specialist mentor services supporting Aboriginal people and specialist advocates as well. There is one specialist mentor service supporting people with a mental illness. There are specialist mentor services supporting women and supporting gender-diverse and non-binary people. There are supports and programs for people in the disability and aged care sector and a partnership with housing on social housing tenants. There is one specialist mentor service supporting women experiencing family violence as well.

But we do have other approaches from time to time, and if we find a gap then we seek to remedy that. For one of the things we talked about, the LGBTIQ+ community, one of the things that we are exploring is whether or not a specialist service would be suitable and advantageous and would be able to be delivered statewide. Therefore would it be better to have a specialist service centrally that is available everywhere, rather than somebody going to see, say, if they lived in Mildura, their local person in Mildura? Conversely, we are working with some communities in Melbourne's inner-north suburbs on some historical challenges with communities that have experienced profound trauma disproportionate to their number in their lives and whether or not we need to enhance there. Again, the program has the flexibility to be able to respond accordingly. But we do have quite a spread of specialist services.

Mr RICHARDSON: Just in the minute and a half I have got left I will take you a bit further into the Jobs Victoria Fund and specifically budget paper 3, page 252, which talks about subsidised jobs for jobseekers through the Jobs Victoria Fund. I am wondering if you could please provide an update for our committee on the implementation of the Jobs Victoria Fund initiative. Obviously you have covered a lot of ground with many members at the moment in this space on some of those priority cohorts, but how is the implementation of that initiative going?

Ms PULFORD: Yes. So we are certainly confident about meeting the targets. I have a breakdown of subsidised jobs by industry sector, the greatest being: accommodation and food services at 102, retail trade at 88, financial services at 64 and then it runs down to life sciences and media and public relations at one apiece. By priority group, again by percentage or by raw number—we have that too. But in terms of the various public commitments and the objectives of the fund, they are all tracking as we would have hoped. We proposed a 60-40 split in response to the gendered nature of the pandemic. Sixty-three per cent are women. Correct me if I am wrong, Lisa, but it is not like this is something that requires daily adjustment. The program design is delivering the outcomes as was intended.

Mr RICHARDSON: Fantastic. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Mr Hibbins.

Mr HIBBINS: Thanks, Chair. Thanks, Minister and your team, for appearing today. My questions really do relate to the breakdown in terms of the subsidy-attracting jobs. Are you able to provide—whether you have

already covered it or not—the industry that the subsidies have gone to but then also the groups of people that attracted the subsidy? You can take it on notice—or if you have got the information there.

Ms PULFORD: I might invite Lisa to speak to it. It is very similar to what we have just been talking about, and we are also happy to provide it to the committee on notice. But I might ask Lisa to respond briefly.

Ms BUCKINGHAM: The top industry that is attracting the wage subsidies is professional services, and then it pretty much tracks to how we understand workforce shortages to exist, so accommodation and retail, transport, health care and social assistance, tourism, rec services, and then it pretty much trails off quite quickly after that. We are hitting about 63 per cent female, and then the other priority cohorts that Minister Pulford outlined before—we are heading towards an equal share in the population, so people with disability and young people, we are tracking really well. People who have a multicultural background and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people—we are hitting those targets, but they are not public targets that we set in terms of the BP3 targets. That is being hit and met.

Mr HIBBINS: Yes, okay. And you can provide those breakdowns.

Ms PULFORD: Yes.

Ms BUCKINGHAM: Absolutely.

Mr HIBBINS: Terrific. I notice there was a change in the guidelines in November. What brought about those changes?

Ms PULFORD: That included the change to single parents from the \$10 000 subsidy to the \$20 000 subsidy, and veterans. Again I guess that change in the guidelines represents the maturation and the evolution of the program and where we have seen the opportunities. And there were some other modest adjustments to make it simpler for both employers and employees to access the program.

Mr HIBBINS: Was there a change as well for a person who is already employed by a company, or what have you, or a business and then continues employment? Is that part of it as well?

Ms PULFORD: Yes. That actually really was a reflection of the time that the labour market was starting to tighten. Things were opening up and employers were looking for people, and we found that there were people who were not eligible who would be casual. Their employer and they were hoping to make them permanent full time or part time. They were excluded, and we did not want to have them excluded in this environment, so that was another adjustment that was made there. So somebody who might have been working, say, 5 hours a week on a really casual basis could be supported with a subsidy to come in to a more permanent and ongoing role.

Mr HIBBINS: Yes, okay. Terrific. Thanks, Minister. Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Mr Hibbins. And thanks, Minister. That concludes the time we have set aside for consideration of the employment portfolio today. Thank you for appearing before the committee in this capacity. The committee will follow up on any questions taken on notice in writing, and responses will be required within five working days of the committee's request.

The committee will take a short break before moving to consideration of the small business portfolio.

Witnesses withdrew.