

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 Ros Spence MP, Minister for Multicultural Affairs,

Ms Brigid Monagle, Associate Secretary,

Ms Nicola Young, Senior Executive Director, Fairer Victoria, Engagement and Coordination, and

Mr Mike Hubbard, Executive Director, Fairer Victoria, Engagement and Coordination, Department of Families, Fairness and Housing.

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 again welcome Minister Spence, this time in her capacity as multicultural affairs minister, and officers of her department. We invite you to make an opening statement, and this will be followed by questions from the committee.

Visual presentation.

Ms SPENCE: Thank you, Chair, and to the committee, for the opportunity to detail the Victorian government's investment in the multicultural affairs portfolio through the 2022–23 state budget. I would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we are meeting today, including their elders past and present.

Our key achievements for the 2021–22 year focused on the targeted communications outreach and support that we provided during the pandemic. We supported 1.5 million CALD Victorians by providing emergency relief and welfare supports as well as disseminating pandemic-related information.

The portfolio delivered a range of grant programs to support multicultural communities over the last 12 months. This included the Multicultural Community Infrastructure Fund, which funded 30 organisations to upgrade their community facilities; the multicultural festivals and events program, which funded community organisations to deliver over 500 events; and the multicultural seniors support grants program, which funded more than 850 multicultural seniors organisations to reduce isolation and build stronger community connections. Our government also provided targeted supports for new and emerging communities, including almost \$1 million for Refugee Legal to provide free legal advice to more than 2500 people seeking asylum and 2300 Afghan community members, and we have continued to implement the *Victorian African Communities Action Plan*, including the homework club program and the school community liaison officers program, which have assisted over 1500 students and their families to engage with education and their school communities, and the employment initiatives, which have assisted over 300 jobseekers of African heritage to gain training, certification and employment opportunities.

The portfolio continued to work with and support multicultural communities to respond to and recover from the pandemic, with an investment of over \$21 million in 2021–22—\$8.45 million went to the priority response for

the multicultural communities program, which funded 500 projects that supported families to isolate and stay safe by delivering culturally tailored food packages and outreach support across 73 LGAs. This involved partnering with 340 community organisations, 95 of which were new to working with government; \$6.8 million supported communications activities to ensure multicultural communities received in-language COVID-19 information. This included funding for 77 multicultural media and community organisations to create tailored content through the multicultural communications outreach program—recipients for round 2 of that program will be announced shortly—and funding to continue the government’s partnership with the National Ethnic and Multicultural Broadcasters Council, which produced a multilingual news service in 19 languages across ethnic community radio stations and online. Twelve local partnerships were funded to engage approximately 200 bicultural workers to improve understanding of COVID-safe behaviours and support the vaccine rollout.

The 2022–23 budget is investing a further \$22.7 million in our multicultural communities. This includes \$6.7 million for Victoria’s critical settlement support services, \$6.4 million for the Multicultural Community Infrastructure Fund, a further \$4.4 million to continue working with African communities across Victoria to implement the Victorian African Communities Action Plan, \$3.7 million to continue COVID-19 support for multicultural communities, \$1.1 million for the multicultural festivals and events program to ensure Victoria’s diverse communities can celebrate and share their cultures and traditions, and \$300 000 to support the establishment of a new language services state purchase contract so our communities can access the high-quality interpreting services they need when they need them.

This government will continue to invest in our multicultural communities as we emerge from the pandemic. I would like to thank them for their resilience and their community spirit in tackling the challenges of the last two years together. I thank the committee for their interest in this portfolio.

The CHAIR: Mr Newbury.

Mr NEWBURY: Thank you. Minister, in relation to the slides, do you mind if the department takes on notice the 30 organisations to upgrade and build multicultural community facilities, and also on the next slide the 500 projects with 340 community organisations? If you would not mind taking those on notice, that would be really terrific.

Minister, can I take you to BP3, page 213, specifically the item relating to regional-rural grant funding and the percentages therein. It shows a target of 20 per cent and an outcome of 15 per cent. What is the difference about?

Ms SPENCE: Yes. The reason for that difference was because of the multicultural seniors support program, which represented a significant portion of the overall funding that was allocated during 2021–22, and an overwhelming majority of those multicultural seniors organisations were in metropolitan Melbourne.

Mr NEWBURY: Okay. So am I right in saying therefore 85 per cent of funding is city based and 15 per cent of it is regional based? How did you come to the apportionment therein? I mean, it is quite stark.

Ms SPENCE: Sorry. Are you asking why we have retained that figure?

Mr NEWBURY: No, no. It is a heavy city split—

Ms SPENCE: Well, in a normal year—

Mr NEWBURY: in terms of grant funding. There is a lot of money going into the city and not much money going to regional.

Ms SPENCE: In a normal year there would be additional grants going to regional, but it was not a normal year. I will pass to Mr Hubbard to explain why.

Mr HUBBARD: Thank you, Minister. I think the starting point is that the 20 per cent is actually a stretch target. If you look at where multicultural communities are located within Victoria, it is between 10 to 15 per cent that are actually in regional Victoria, so the 20 per cent is already above and beyond their representation in the regions.

Mr NEWBURY: Okay.

Mr HUBBARD: And just in terms of how the outcome is arrived at, that is obviously the summation of all the different grant programs that are delivered through the portfolio in a given year. We provide a range of different incentives and changes within the program guidelines to try and incentivise supports to regional communities, including through lower matched-funding requirements, lower attendance thresholds and a greater ability to have community support included as their financial contributions. Also as part of the merit-based assessment that the department does when we brief the minister on recommendations, we weight things more heavily towards regional applications. So there are a range of initiatives we already do on the grant side of things to try and get that higher proportion of grants going to regional Victoria.

Mr NEWBURY: And I take it partly because there is probably more difficulty in creating the organisations there; it is a recognition of that.

Mr HUBBARD: That is right.

Mr NEWBURY: In relation to the \$1.1 million for the festivals and events program that was in the slide, did all of those events occur? So when the \$1.1 million went out, did all of those events occur? Because we have had COVID.

Mr HUBBARD: Not all of them. When there are 500 events in a given year, absolutely they have not all gone ahead. We have had a mix of them. About 90 per cent of the events that we have funded in the past year we have wanted to be in-person. Some of those have been impacted by COVID, as you would expect, over the course of last year. The department has continued to offer to work with organisations to reschedule, rescope or amend the timing of those events.

Mr NEWBURY: With that 90 per cent, do you have any kind of oversight on how many did occur?

Mr HUBBARD: Not off the top of my head. Apologies. No, I do not.

Mr NEWBURY: No, it was not a trick question; it was—

Mr HUBBARD: The majority did. There were a reasonable number, as you would expect, either where a geographic region had an outbreak or an organiser had something which impacted their ability to pull together the event.

Mr NEWBURY: So is there some tracking? Once the money goes out, what happens?

Mr HUBBARD: Yes, absolutely. When we enter into a contract with the organisation, there are a range of milestones and there is regular dialogue between the department and them. If the event cannot proceed for whatever reason, there will be a conversation between the department and the grant recipient about what will be done to reschedule or rescope.

Mr NEWBURY: And if, for example, the time has passed, does the money get recouped?

Mr HUBBARD: The general principle that we have is that we want the event to go ahead. We put the emphasis back on the organisation that is receiving the funds, so if they want to reschedule within the next six to 12 months, then we have a conversation with them about that. If that was the case, no, they would not need to return the funds. If for some reason they did not want to go ahead with the event and they had expended money, then we would have a conversation with them about whether there are unspent moneys that they may need to return. But that is at the organisation's discretion usually, and as I said, the general preference is to go ahead.

Mr NEWBURY: It is by their choice?

Mr HUBBARD: Sorry, it is not at their discretion, I should say, we try and work with them to make it happen. It is only where they are saying, 'We can't' or they do not want to go ahead with the event that we would be looking to recoup funds.

Mr NEWBURY: Would it be possible to get on notice some understanding of those events and where that is up to at some point in time, in terms of how many are outstanding or how many have been recouped or chosen to not go ahead, and any kind of understanding of those—what was it—500 events?

Mr HUBBARD: I mean, in terms of recoups it might literally be a handful. I would suggest it is less than five.

Mr NEWBURY: Whatever the number is is whatever the number is. I am just talking about it in terms of an understanding of the program. I was just looking for a point in time of how it is going.

Mr HUBBARD: Yes.

Mr NEWBURY: Is that okay?

Mr HUBBARD: Yes, I am happy to take that on notice. I do not have that figure to hand.

Mr NEWBURY: I completely understand. In relation to budget paper 3, page 39, and the multicultural grants, I just wanted to have a bit of understanding of how the grant funding works in terms of sign-offs. Minister, how does the sign-off process work?

Ms SPENCE: So the guidelines are signed off by me, then there is an assessment process, which is independent, by a panel, then recommendations come to me for sign-off, in short.

Mr NEWBURY: Thank you.

Ms SPENCE: That was a very abridged version.

Mr NEWBURY: Great. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. Ms Richards.

Ms RICHARDS: Thank you, Minister and officials, for your time this evening. I am interested in exploring the culturally and linguistically diverse communities task force. Sorry, I am a bit tongue-tied. It is getting a bit late. I would like to refer you to budget paper 3 and page 39. It commits funding to extend the operation of the culturally and linguistically diverse task force to June 2023. Could you, please, for the benefit of committee members detail some of the positive outcomes of this task force since it was established to warrant this 12-month funding extension.

Ms SPENCE: Thank you, Ms Richards, for your question. The CALD Communities Taskforce has played a really critical role in supporting Victoria's CALD communities since it was established in August 2020. We know that multicultural communities have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic, which has further exacerbated inequalities that existed prior to COVID. Some of those impacts were uniquely experienced by CALD Victorians, and these included barriers to accessing in-language health information and culturally appropriate food relief and other supports. Multicultural Victorians were over-represented in the casual workforce, which also suffered significant job losses during the pandemic, as well as service sectors that experienced a high risk of exposure to COVID-19.

So working across government in a direct partnership with CALD communities, the task force has supported a culturally tailored response to the pandemic that improved preparedness for future outbreaks. Through the work of the task force the number of organisations with connections to the Victorian government has increased by 28 per cent. This has enabled greater engagement and community inreach to spread health messages, to encourage uptake of the vaccine and to improve access to support services.

Funding through the priority response to multicultural communities program, or the PRMC program, has enabled multicultural and multifaith community organisations to deliver grassroots support, including emergency relief, vaccination support and outreach activities right across Victoria. PRMC phases 1, 2 and 3 funded more than 340 organisations and delivered 500 projects across 73 local government areas. To date, more than 176 000 families have been supported by the program, 408 000 food kits have been provided and 751 745 meals have been served. This has reached nearly 1 million Victorians, so they are really outstanding figures.

By way of example, the Water Well Project used PRMC funding of \$300 000 in round 2 to facilitate a health information session for parents at inner-suburban primary schools—at Fitzroy Primary School and Collingwood College. Women from Amharic, Arabic and Somali language groups attended, as well as two

interpreters and a community liaison officer, and this facilitated a discussion of mental health issues and stressors experienced during lockdowns and provided a forum to discuss and address concerns around vaccinating children. Those that attended the session then in turn shared that information more broadly within their communities, so it formed a bit of an information tree and a message tree back into community, which is incredibly valuable.

The local partnerships model was also developed in conjunction with the CALD communities task force, and throughout the pandemic it has provided place-based, culturally sensitive support to communities with a focus on encouraging vaccination; for example, local partnerships in Hume, in Moreland and in Whittlesea local government areas. For one example, they worked with local Muslim leaders and communities and mosques to provide in-language information about COVID-safe behaviours and support services as well as hosting vaccine pop-up clinics in the lead up to Ramadan in late March and Eid festivals in early May. So the task force has had some really terrific outcomes, and that is why I am really proud that this budget includes a further \$3.7 million to continue the activities of the CALD communities task force to provide further support for both local partnerships and the PRMC program.

Ms RICHARDS: Thank you, Minister. Obviously, as you know, that has been a really important program for many of our communities, so that has been really valuable. I see that there is a funding injection into the local partnerships model in the budget. I am interested in understanding how this program has helped communities prepare and respond to COVID-19 and how it is supporting the social and economic recovery of multicultural communities.

Ms SPENCE: Thank you for that follow-up question. The local partnerships model is a place-based and culturally responsive initiative to support multicultural communities during the COVID-19 pandemic. It provides culturally safe and appropriate messaging to communities about COVID-19 and COVID-safe behaviours and information about testing and isolation requirements whilst boosting vaccination uptake by addressing vaccine hesitancy and also those accessibility issues. The model involves partnerships with 12 local partners, which are funded to work with local government and with health service providers to engage bicultural workers and to link with community groups to improve understanding of those COVID-safe behaviours, access to supports and, critically, to support the vaccine rollout. Between April 2021 and March 2022 the local partnerships have employed 197 bicultural workers and 364 health champions to support engagement with communities. They have supported 342 000 individuals, they have delivered 38 437 food relief packages, they have supported 976 vaccination information sessions, which have been attended by over 14 000 people, and they have used 218 different languages for engagement. So these local partnerships have been really critical in supporting the Victorian government's vaccine rollout within multicultural communities.

Through the program, local councils have partnered with local health services to also deliver those pop-up vaccination sites in response to low vaccination rates among children and eligible recipients for third doses. So that has been another key—having that local intelligence. Where are these appropriate sites going to be? Where is the local CALD community going to access? What are the key pieces of information? The local partnerships have been very good at providing that. So the local partnerships have been an important initiative to increase that vaccine uptake, to provide culturally appropriate information about the vaccine rollout as well as linking local CALD community members to supports when they have needed that in the community.

Ms RICHARDS: Thanks so much. With less than a minute left, I will leave it there.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Richards. Mr Hibbins.

Mr HIBBINS: Thank you, Chair. Obviously I think we have seen over the last two years the importance of getting translated and appropriate communications materials into multicultural backgrounds, into people's hands, and I think it is still an ongoing issue. By way of example, I have been advised that in one instance while there are four main dialects in Kurdish, the government only chose one to use to translate materials. Obviously that meant the information was very difficult to navigate, and community groups ended up having to translate the materials themselves, sharing them through social media and WhatsApp groups. Can I ask: are you reviewing just how communication materials are translated and communicated in various languages?

Ms SPENCE: I have to say the issue of communication in language is something that has been reviewed constantly throughout the pandemic. I think more has probably been learned about this than many other things. We have certainly come a long way, and we have done an awful lot in this space.

The communication primarily sits with health, but the multicultural affairs portfolio has done a huge amount of work in this space during the pandemic. What we have found is that there is no one correct way to communicate. We certainly know that the written word is not the best way to communicate, and that is why we have had such a diverse range of programs that we have rolled out. That could be through the WhatsApp community leaders group—we communicate through that because there is the importance of having the information tree. It is also important that community members do provide information to one another, so we do not discount that as being an effective way of communicating. There needs to be oral communication—there needs to be a whole range. The multicultural communications outreach program provided funds to develop communications by multicultural communities for multicultural communities, not by government for multicultural communities. We have learned that that is incredibly important—not just the written word but the spoken word. Colouring books were developed for residents in public housing. That was an incredibly effective way of communicating. Song—the diversity of communications is important.

But then there is another side of communication, and that is what is the right language to communicate in. Even if you found the right dialect to communicate in, there are issues with age. Young people may communicate in that dialect differently to an older person communicating in that dialect, so the complexity of communication is endless. We have learned a lot. Have we got it right? We have got it pretty good, but it is not perfect. I do not think that we can get it perfect, but we will continue to work on it.

The partnership with the National Ethnic and Multicultural Broadcasters' Council is continuing to provide multilingual news services in 19 languages—that is incredibly important because we know that many of our multicultural communities do not read the news but they will listen to the radio. So that has been an incredibly important way of communicating. We will continue to do work in that space.

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

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Hibbins. That concludes the time we have set aside for consideration of the multicultural affairs portfolio with you this evening. Thank you for appearing in this capacity also. 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.

We thank all ministers and officers who have given evidence to the committee today, as well as Hansard, the committee secretariat and parliamentary attendants. We also thank the hospitality, security and cleaning staff who have looked after all of us.

The committee will resume consideration of the 2022–23 budget estimates tomorrow. I declare this hearing adjourned.

Committee adjourned.