

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 Youth,

Ms Brigid Monagle, Associate Secretary,

Ms Gerry Goswell, Executive Director, Fairer Victoria, Engagement and Coordination, and

Ms Nicola Young, Senior 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 welcome Minister Spence, this time for the youth portfolio, as well as officers of your department. Minister, we invite you to make an opening statement. This will be followed by questions from the committee.

Visual presentation.

Ms SPENCE: Thank you, Chair, and thank you to committee for the opportunity to present on the youth portfolio, including investments through the 2022–23 Victorian budget. Can I begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we are meeting today, including elders past and present.

The youth portfolio is focused on ensuring that young people have a say on the issues that affect their lives by creating opportunities for their diverse voices to be heard and giving them a seat at the decision-making tables. Young people are having their say and actively participating in civic life in Victoria through initiatives such as the Victorian Youth Congress and the annual Youth Parliament, and young people's participation in and connection to their communities continues to be facilitated through initiatives such as the Advance program, Victorian Youth Fest and Scouts and Girl Guides.

In terms of key highlights for the past year, the government expanded the Engage! and FReeZA programs, providing a funding boost to support almost 200 organisations to enable almost 200 000 young people to build their skills and experience and connect to their communities. The six community support groups supported young people and their families with 6630 case management plans and referrals to relevant community services and other supports. This is on top of the essential support delivered by the community support groups during the pandemic, which provided everything from emergency food relief to targeted health messaging to internet devices for young people to stay connected with their studies and to their communities.

I am excited to report that a total of eight Scout hall projects are now complete as part of the government's \$5.5 million investment in Scouting infrastructure. These new and upgraded facilities are already being used by young people and communities for activities and gatherings, with a further 12 projects scheduled for completion by the end of 2022. The Living Learning Partnerships Addressing Disadvantage commenced with its first cohort of 48 young people with mental health conditions who are being supported to re-engage with

education. This innovative, nation-leading approach is showing early signs of success in supporting vulnerable young people.

This budget commits \$2.4 million over two years for the youth portfolio. We are investing \$1.8 million to continue the Empower Youth program and support to Scouts Victoria and Girl Guides. Empower Youth will continue to provide innovative, intensive and holistic early intervention supports for vulnerable young people in targeted communities across four areas: career pathways, education and training, health and wellbeing, and community involvement. A further one-year of funding for Scouts Victoria and Girl Guides Victoria will help continue delivery of activities to improve young people's access to Scouts and Girl Guides across the state. Both programs build protective factors around vulnerable young people, giving them a sense of belonging and connection to nurture their growth and develop their social skills. We are also investing \$600 000 over two years to support the youth sector to strengthen Aboriginal young people's right to self-determination, building upon the history-making treaty process underway in Victoria.

I am proud that through the youth portfolio we are focused on putting young people at the heart of our work and providing them with the services and supports they need to achieve their goals. In closing, I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge and thank all the organisations across the youth sector for their tireless efforts over the past 12 months in supporting young people. Thank you again to the committee for your interest in this portfolio.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. Mr Newbury.

Mr NEWBURY: Thank you. Minister, can I take you to the total output cost, which is on page 212 of BP3. I note that there has been a cut in the total funding. Noting the difficulty that young people have gone through over the last few years especially, why has the portfolio been cut?

Ms SPENCE: Yes. This is only a 3.4 per cent cut, and I do accept what you are saying about young people having gone through a very difficult time over the past two years.

Mr NEWBURY: Very difficult.

Ms SPENCE: But this is still a 19 per cent increase on funding since 2019–20. The output is still considerably higher than pre COVID, so we are still continuing to invest in young people, acknowledging that this has been an incredibly difficult time.

Mr NEWBURY: I guess I raise it partly because we know, and the experts tell us, that with things like mental health these issues are longstanding and they go on for long after the events have occurred, so we know the funding is needed even if they are COVID related. I accept your points both about previous funding but also your acknowledgement about the reduction. What does that practically mean in terms of programs?

Ms SPENCE: What it practically means is that there are no lapsing programs within the youth portfolio. If I can go to your point about mental health, that is an incredibly important area in regard to young people, but that is funding that is not in the youth portfolio.

Mr NEWBURY: Yes, I understand. I just meant youth support in the broader term.

Ms SPENCE: Absolutely, and that is why we have got both output funding that is considerably comparable to previous funding and considerably higher than pre-COVID funding, because this is a time where we do need to take care and make sure that those supports are around young people, and that is what this budget does.

Mr NEWBURY: Thank you. Can I take you to YACVic's comments on the budget? If I can read them to you. They are disappointed by the lack of targeted investment for programs and initiatives that support young people and the youth sector. Do you have any comments in relation to YACVic's comments?

Ms SPENCE: I would fully expect a peak body to advocate strongly for additional funding.

Mr NEWBURY: Hear, hear.

Ms SPENCE: That is absolutely what they should be doing. This budget does provide good support, adequate support, and I do not begrudge YACVic for one moment advocating for more. They should always do that.

Mr NEWBURY: Can I ask a couple of questions in relation to your presentation. The Engage! and FreeZA 200 organisations—are you able to provide on notice a copy of those 200 organisations?

Ms SPENCE: Yes.

Mr NEWBURY: With the funding amount, where possible?

Ms SPENCE: Yes.

Ms GOSWELL: I have a copy of it now, thank you, Mr Newbury.

Mr NEWBURY: You can do it on notice if that is easier.

Ms GOSWELL: I could read the list of 200 organisations if you wish.

Mr NEWBURY: We have only got 3½ minutes. Can I ask a bit more about the living and learning partnerships as well? There were 48—

Ms SPENCE: The PAD? The Living Learning PAD?

Mr NEWBURY: Yes, sorry. Can I ask a bit about that?

Ms SPENCE: Yes, you can. Let me just get my information.

Mr NEWBURY: It is not a trick question. I just wondered—

Ms SPENCE: No, it is not. I just want to be accurate in the information that I provide to you. So this was initially funded in 2018–19, and it supported 144 young people. That was what the initial funding was for. It was \$15 million to deliver the program to support 144 young people aged 15 to 21 who were experiencing mental health conditions to re-engage with education. So we have had the initial results from that, which have been quite pleasing. So it is continuing, yes.

Mr NEWBURY: So there is still funding to provide additional people with support, the remaining 100. Is that right?

Ms SPENCE: There will be three cohorts of 48 young people starting each year from 2021 to 2023. The first cohort that started in 2021 have completed their first year of the program with no student attrition, which is fantastic, and there are currently 77 referrals for cohort 2.

Mr NEWBURY: Thank you. You mentioned also the Scout halls and 12 remaining. Have all 12 been announced in terms of location?

Ms SPENCE: I think we have one that has not been announced yet, which I am very hopeful will be announced very soon.

Mr NEWBURY: Well, Brighton Sea Scouts are the biggest in Australia. So I can live in hope, can I?

Ms SPENCE: I do not determine. Scouts advise as to where they have priority areas. So I am sure that you would be very pleased to hear that it is not my decision as to where these are located.

Mr NEWBURY: Well, if it is Brighton and you make the decision I will be happy either way.

Shadow Pandemic Victoria presented to one of the parliamentary committees last week and talked about the need for children to be considered in government decision-making. Did you see that or hear about that presentation, have thoughts on it?

Ms SPENCE: I did not see their presentation, but if you would like me to talk about young people having a role in government decision-making I am more than happy to go to that broadly, because this is a matter that we discussed with young people quite extensively during consultation for the youth strategy, and it was an issue that came up quite a lot.

Now, during that consultation we spoke with or we had engagement with around 2000 young people. There were about 1800 submissions made, and having involvement in decision-making was something that came through and something that we have taken very seriously. So that is a theme that is very important to us.

Now, there is the Victorian Youth Congress that is one avenue that young people do have buy-in, that they have involvement, but that is a limited number of people and perhaps does not in my view serve that purpose entirely.

Mr NEWBURY: And they have that big map at the end of it, don't they? That mind map? They produce the big mind map at the end of it?

Ms SPENCE: They do a bit more than that. There is—

Mr NEWBURY: No, but in addition—they do that too.

Ms SPENCE: There is a piece of work that—yes.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Newbury. Your time has expired. Ms Taylor.

Ms TAYLOR: Good evening, Minister and officials. Thank you for being here. So if I could refer you to budget paper 3, page 39, it appears that output under the youth portfolio is focused strongly on supporting disadvantaged young people. Could you please explain how the Empower Youth program supports disadvantaged young people in Victoria?

Ms SPENCE: Thank you, Ms Taylor, for your question and for your interest in this area. It is an area of focus for the youth portfolio and something that is very important to me, and as you note, it is a key priority. We know that due to a range of circumstances some young people become disconnected from family, from education and also from community. So young people can have complex needs, and others experience barriers to participation that can hinder their development as well as their pathway to independence. Coming from a low socio-economic background, experiencing family violence or homelessness, living with a disability or poor mental health or being born into a marginalised community can all lead to a young person being disengaged. As a result, these young people often require more intensive and tailored support to achieve their goals and to improve their life outcomes, and that is exactly the kind of support that the Empower Youth program provides.

Empower Youth funds youth workers across five local council and community organisations to provide holistic and coordinated support to young people. These youth workers strengthen young people's health and wellbeing, they connect them to community and they engage them in education and training and to other pathways to employment. Empower Youth is a place-based program which ensures that young people do not have to leave their community to seek help, which is why youth workers also partner with other services and other organisations in the area to provide ongoing wraparound supports. What is really special about Empower Youth is that young people are directly engaged in the design and the delivery of their local program, and co-designing programs with young people results in better engagement and stronger delivery of services and activities that young people need to achieve their goals. Of course, the challenges that young people faced prior to the pandemic have only been exacerbated since, and the need for programs like Empower Youth has become much greater, which is why I am really pleased that the 2022–23 state budget is investing to continue the Empower Youth program for another two years.

Ms TAYLOR: Good. And does the Empower Youth program support young people outside of metro Melbourne?

Ms SPENCE: Thank you again for that follow-up question. It is so important to ensure that our programs are tailored to support disadvantaged people right across Victoria, because we know that disadvantage occurs right across Victoria and we know that the challenges and experiences of young people in regional Victoria are also different to the experiences of young people in metropolitan Melbourne. For example, young people in the

regions face greater difficulties in accessing services and supports close to home, and they are more likely to experience socio-economic disadvantage. This is also the case for young people residing in the outer suburbs of Melbourne. That is why all five of the organisations that are funded through Empower Youth are located in areas of socio-economic disadvantage, and the Member for Cranbourne and the Member for Narre Warren South would both be aware of and familiar with the incredibly work of South East Community Links, one of the Empower Youth delivery organisations which service young people in the City of Casey and the City of Greater Dandenong. Our other metropolitan delivery partner is Whittlesea Community Connections, which provides supports to young people in Melbourne's outer north. Of course, we recognise it is so important to deliver tailored services in regional centres that meet the needs of people within that catchment. That is why our remaining three Empower Youth providers are all located outside of metropolitan Melbourne, and they service the communities of Greater Geelong through CatholicCare Victoria, in Moorabool through Moorabool Shire Council and in Swan Hill through Swan Hill Rural City Council. It is really important that we do not just have these services in metropolitan Melbourne. They need to be in both metropolitan and regional Victoria, and they are, so that is a great spread of service provision.

Ms TAYLOR: And has the youth portfolio determined the impact of Empower Youth and the need for it to continue?

Ms SPENCE: Thank you for that follow-up question. In 2021 an independent evaluation of the Empower Youth program was conducted, and the evaluation revealed the efficacy of Empower Youth and the fact that existing participants need the program more than ever as they recover from the pandemic. I would be happy to provide some key achievements of the program between 2019 and 2021, which are reflected in that evaluation. Empower Youth workers provided over 900 disadvantaged young people with dedicated case management support during the evaluation period. They worked with approximately 60 young people each year to co-design activities and outreach and engagement approaches, and they facilitated partnerships with over 75 service organisations; schools; councils; education, training and employment networks; and youth sector organisations. This has enabled a cohesive and coordinated youth sector which is local to the young person and is tailored to their needs. Empower Youth has supported more than 100 young people to participate in activities that improve physical and mental health and wellbeing and another 330 in activities that improve educational engagement. 180 young people who were disengaged or at risk of disengaging have been supported to re-engage with education, increase their attendance rate and transition to alternative education or training pathways. Almost 100 young people have been supported to find employment and volunteering opportunities, and more than 380 young people have reconnected with their peers, families and communities through the program. So that independent evaluation has shown some really terrific results of Empower Youth—very valuable insights—and I am really pleased that we are able to continue it now that we have those insights and we know the absolute value of this program.

Ms TAYLOR: Good. Also referencing budget paper 3, page 39 and I think 51, can you explain how Victorian government funding will boost participation of young people in Scouting and Girl Guide activities? And I have to say every time I go to a Scouts event or whatever I am just blown away by the amazing activities they do. Anyway, I will contain my excitement and hit it back to you.

Ms SPENCE: Thank you. Look, all young people should have the opportunity to participate in Scouting and Girl Guide activities, but we know that a variety of barriers do exist that prevent young people from getting involved. Whether the barrier is cost, gender or living regionally, the funding that we provide to Scouts Victoria and Girl Guides Victoria works to break these barriers down and to improve accessibility. We do this by funding social engagement officers within Scouts and Girl Guides to work with low socio-economic, culturally diverse and rural and regional communities to boost the participation of young people in new and emerging groups. Our funding also goes towards supporting Scouts and Girl Guides Victoria to deliver training to existing and future Scout leaders as well as to adult volunteers to promote greater inclusion of disadvantaged cohorts of young people.

Even though Girl Guides Victoria is smaller than Scouts Victoria, we provide equal funding to each organisation. This even distribution means that proportionally more funding is going towards supporting young women and girls to participate in Scouting and Guiding activities. We recognise the importance of a girls-only program in Girl Guides Victoria and how critical this participation can be.

Ms TAYLOR: Thank you.

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

Mr HIBBINS: Thank you, Chair. I want to ask about the youth strategy and the time line for that, in that it was due to be launched mid to late 2021. What is the status now of the youth strategy and when can—

Ms SPENCE: We were delayed, Mr Hibbins, unfortunately, and I am incredibly disappointed that we were delayed due to COVID. A lot of work went into it—as you know; we have spoken about it before—and we were really very pleased with the work that we have been able to undertake. There were a lot of people involved. It is still progressing—it certainly has not been shelved or stopped in any way—but there was no doubt a delay due to COVID in us progressing. We are continuing to work on it, we are continuing to progress, and I can assure you that the youth strategy will be released this year.

Mr HIBBINS: Okay. I note—and it was also stated by YACVic—there was no funding for the youth strategy in this year’s budget as well. Will the youth strategy attract funding?

Ms SPENCE: I will have more to say about the funding when the youth strategy is released. We will discuss it at that time, but there will be funding with the strategy.

Mr HIBBINS: Was it delayed because there was no funding in this year’s budget?

Ms SPENCE: No, the strategy was not ready to release prior to the budget.

Mr HIBBINS: Okay. This may be beyond your portfolio scope, but there is obviously a lot of discussion about youth participation and what have you. There is a federal election coming up. It is one of many elections we have here in Australia. Does the government support lowering the voting age so young people can have the option or right to vote?

Ms SPENCE: Well, that is not in my portfolio. But perhaps you might like to consider a reference to the Electoral Matters Committee, which I was previously a member of.

Mr HIBBINS: Oh, there you go. That is not a bad idea.

Ms SPENCE: Mrs McArthur is a member of the Electoral Matters Committee. I am sure you can have a chat and think about that. There has previously been a report—

Mr HIBBINS: Yes, great. Okay. Thanks, Chair. James, did you want to give a shout-out to your constituent?

Ms SPENCE: Were you on that committee?

Mr NEWBURY: No. No, I was not.

Ms SPENCE: There was a previous reference on civics and youth engagement when I was on that committee. You might want to just have a look at that report. It was quite a good reference.

Mr HIBBINS: Okay. All right. Will do. Can I just cede a minute to—

Mr NEWBURY: Can I just note Gabby Kanizay, who is the youngest Australian to have climbed Mount Everest. She did so in the last, I think, 24 hours—a Brighton girl—and I think as we all deal with this portfolio we should all give her a shout-out.

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

Ms SPENCE: Happy to. Well done, Gabby.

Mr D O’BRIEN: Well done, Gabby.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Newbury. Thank you, Minister. That concludes the time we have set aside for consideration of the youth affairs portfolio. Thank you very much for appearing before the committee in this capacity today. 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 now take a short break before moving to consideration of the multicultural affairs portfolio with you.

I declare this hearing adjourned.

Witnesses withdrew.