

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the 2022-23 Budget Estimates

Melbourne—Wednesday, 18 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 Natalie Hutchins MP, Minister for Crime Prevention,

Ms Rebecca Falkingham, Secretary, and

Ms Corri McKenzie, Deputy Secretary, Police, Fines and Crime Prevention, Department of Justice and Community Safety.

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 Hutchins in the first instance for the crime prevention portfolio. We invite you to make an opening statement. This will be followed by questions from the committee. Thank you.

Visual presentation.

Ms HUTCHINS: Thank you, Chair. Can I too begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we meet.

To go straight into my slides around crime prevention, since 2015–16 this government has provided over \$90 million in crime prevention funding and has supported more than 860 projects that increase community safety and confidence across Victoria. This is in addition to the government's broader substantial investments in education, housing, jobs and policing, which help keep people's lives on track. As outlined in our *Crime Prevention Strategy*, we know crime prevention is most effective when community work together to find local solutions to local problems, which is why we are investing to deliver key initiatives such as our building safer communities program. As we continue to recover from the pandemic, we remain more committed than ever to supporting and partnering with local communities and trusted organisations such as Crime Stoppers and Neighbourhood Watch.

Next slide. The latest quarterly crime stats for Victoria show a decrease in criminal offences by 12.7 per cent and a 13.3 per cent decrease in the number of alleged youth offender incidences. These figures demonstrate that we are making good progress towards the long-term aims of our *Crime Prevention Strategy*. However, we know there is a lot more to be done and that some groups remain over-represented in the youth justice space in particular. As of 9 March this year, 46 per cent of young people under youth justice supervision in community and custody were from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, including 9 per cent from the Islander Pasifika community, 22 per cent from African-Australian backgrounds and 15 per cent from other CALD communities. This is a matter that is highly relevant not only to the youth justice portfolio but to this one, crime prevention.

In this year's budget this government has invested a further \$6 million to continue key crime prevention programs, including \$4.5 million for the youth crime prevention grants to support young people to build positive pathways and avoid contact with the justice system by addressing the risk factors for offending, and

\$1.5 million for the Northern Community Support Group to support Muslim communities in the northern suburbs of Melbourne.

Our further investment of \$4.5 million in the youth crime prevention grants takes our total investment for this program since the 2016–17 budget to over \$26 million. Since the program began over 1500 young people have been provided with intensive support. We know from independent evaluations how successful this program has been in reducing offending for young people. Our most recent evaluation found that of the young people who had offended prior to being part of the program there was a 29 per cent reduction—that is, from 93 per cent of this group offending to 64 per cent after exiting the program. Seriousness of offending was also down by 24 per cent.

Like our youth crime prevention grants, the Northern Community Support Group has also played a really important role in supporting Victorians' communities and safety. Since 2018 the Northern Community Support Group has delivered over 260 programs and activities to around 100 000 people from 49 different language groups and has made about 1800 referrals for case management for vulnerable community members with high-risk or complex needs—and that has continued all through the COVID pandemic. Our new investment of \$1.5 million acknowledges the important work of the Northern CSG and builds on previous investments over the last two budgets. In addition to providing support services, the Northern CSG has also provided vital COVID-19 support to community, particularly around vaccination information.

As I have mentioned, we know that our communities across Victoria have the right knowledge and skills to design and deliver solutions to prevent crime at a local level. We are supporting a number of local government areas, both metro and regional, to respond to local issues through a \$7.1 million investment in the Empowering Communities program. This involves partnering with local government, police and community organisations to design, deliver, monitor and evaluate innovative solutions to improve our community safety. Under this unique and innovative approach, the Ballarat, Casey, Dandenong, Knox, Hume, Melton, Shepparton and Wyndham local councils, and Brimbank, have been provided with grants to deliver support to build local forums and a local action group and to tackle the areas of concern with the community.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Mr Newbury.

Mr NEWBURY: Thank you. Minister, over the last number of reporting periods stalking, harassment and threatening behaviour have been increasing, and they are obviously very concerning crimes. I do note the investment in the budget, but I do not notice anything in relation to those particular crimes, which are moving upwards. Is there anything in the budget for those particular issues?

Ms HUTCHINS: Yes, there is. There are actually some current programs that are in place and are yet playing out in terms of their delivery. Certainly there is a project that is underway that has continued its work jointly with the Melbourne City Council, which is called the night justice project. That is a project targeting nightclubs, restaurants and a whole range of facilities across the city to look at ways we can make women, girls and gender-diverse people feel safer and be safer in the city. We know that it is those groups that experience much higher levels of sexual harassment and violence in the community, so this project has been developing a toolkit for those venues, delivering training for those venues and also a campaign in conjunction with Crime Stoppers to basically look at ways to educate bystanders as well to step into that space and report and to try and offer assistance where needed, because quite often with that sort of behaviour we find that bystanders tend to not report and not think it is their issue. That is just an example of one project that we have got underway. There are other projects that we are working on with other organisations under the crime prevention space as well.

Mr NEWBURY: Any of those programs that you would like to provide on notice in that regard, please feel free.

Ms HUTCHINS: Happy to.

Mr NEWBURY: Are any of those Neighbourhood Watch?

Ms HUTCHINS: No, not Neighbourhood Watch in this specific area, no, but more developing tools like online safety for women and some research projects. I think Monash University is one of those groups that we

are doing some work with, but I am happy to provide you with some more information in that space about the programs that we are working on.

Mr NEWBURY: And separately on Neighbourhood Watch, as well, if there is anything in terms of supporting them ongoingly and the work they have done for a very, very long time. Has the government done any work or provided any support in relation to CCTV?

Ms HUTCHINS: Just touching on your previous question, we are partnering with Neighbourhood Watch and Crime Stoppers on a number of initiatives, not specifically with Neighbourhood Watch around the issues that you raised but a little bit more with Crime Stoppers in their social media development of their work. But in terms of public safety infrastructure grants that include CCTV investments, there have been quite a few across the state. In a \$31 million investment comprising \$18 million for metropolitan Victoria and \$13 million for regional Victoria, \$8 million of that has been invested in CCTV projects, including \$3.8 million to support metropolitan CCTV projects. Forty-one per cent of that investment was put into metro and 59 per cent into regional. So they have been rolling out in partnership predominantly with councils, and I am happy to go into any details you want.

Mr NEWBURY: Feel free to provide anything on notice that you would like to.

Ms HUTCHINS: I am quite aware of the city of Mildura and certainly the City of Brimbank. We have done some work on installing CCTV cameras into hotspots, which are working really well with local police doing the monitoring.

Mr NEWBURY: Thank you. Minister, I know it is a difficult issue: radicalisation. What work is being done in terms of, for example, how many people have been identified as radicalised?

Ms HUTCHINS: Thanks. The group that I touched on in my presentation, the Northern Community Support Group, have been one of the key providers in helping us deter this sort of radicalisation. They were established back in 2018 and auspiced by the Australian Multicultural Foundation to work across two key sites, one in Broadmeadows and one at the Preston mosque. I just went through all of the programs that they have delivered, but specifically in the deradicalisation space we refer to it as comprehensive case management and intervention for clients that are identified as showing that kind of antisocial behaviour of radicalisation.

Mr NEWBURY: And what was the number that you had with you?

Ms HUTCHINS: 1871 referrals have been made to basically get the support needed where it has been identified—during that entire period, not in the last 12 months.

Mr NEWBURY: What was the period, sorry?

Ms HUTCHINS: Since 2018. Some of those behaviours might be risks of antisocial behaviour towards mainstream criminal offences and some may be broken down into the violent extremism category. I do not have a breakdown of those in front of me.

Mr NEWBURY: Any of that data that you can provide on notice, including things like whether or not those people referred are people in the community or in a facility, would be terrific.

Ms HUTCHINS: I think it is important for me to touch on the fact that we have established a new Countering Violent Extremism Multi-agency Panel, which is working between VicPol and the community to case manage anyone that is on the radar and to continuously check in on them.

Mr NEWBURY: Thank you. Well, the bell has just gone, so thank you.

The CHAIR: Yours was ahead of mine, Mr Newbury. Ms Richards.

Ms RICHARDS: Thank you, Minister and officials, for your time this afternoon. I would like to refer you to budget paper 3, page 287, and specifically the target for grant applications. I am interested in finding out what these grant programs are and what their purpose is.

Ms HUTCHINS: There are probably four main streams to touch on that are listed on that page in particular and across the page as well, and they are all part of our crime prevention strategy, which falls under our Building Safer Communities grants program. Firstly, we have got Creating Safer Places, which supports Victorian councils to improve safety and use public spaces to deter criminal and antisocial behaviour and promote good social behaviour. We also have the Crime Prevention Innovation Fund, which promotes partnerships and supports community orgs and councils to deliver and evaluate innovative community safety programs. And then lastly, we have got our youth engagement grants, which is one stream, and our Empowering Communities grants, which is another, that fall under the banner of Building Safer Communities. They run slightly differently, but really those two grants are probably running out as the most successful ones at the moment.

As I mentioned, there are the partnerships that we have not only with councils like Melbourne City Council and the councils that we are running the Empowering Communities grants with but also partnering with universities and local community leaders and youth support groups as well to make sure that we are delivering services and having targeted solutions in place-based settings. It is pretty easy to try to come up with a one-size-fits-all model through a crime prevention strategy, but that does not deliver the solutions. It has got to be relevant to the local needs and desires of the local community to participate and make that change, particularly when it comes to tackling the root causes of crime.

I have been really happy to partner with the Minister for Small Business to look at ways that we can get partnerships happening into job placements for those that are at risk and also to work on the 16 grant projects that were funded with a total investment of \$4.4 million in the space of these grants and being to roll them out in a really timely manner. Of course, COVID has played a role in the delivery of some of these, but quite frankly a lot of them have been able to continue and pivot to online.

Ms RICHARDS: Great. Thank you. The night justice program appears to be focused on the CBD. Has the program provided support for partnerships or any innovative ideas in regional Victoria?

Ms HUTCHINS: Certainly there has been a number of projects, but I think the one that springs to mind the most is the one in Maryborough, which was a project that we partnered with local council on, which was to light up Lake Victoria up there. There was a community walking group that identified that at certain times of the day, whether it be early in the morning or late at night, women did not feel safe walking there, so a grant of \$150 000 was provided to upgrade the lighting there. We also fund innovative programs that can really challenge behaviours, and recently there was a program for the Centre for Continuing Education in Wangaratta. They were awarded a \$300 000 grant for a program called Finding Strengths, which was an education and support program for young people on community correction orders with social and learning difficulties. It was helping them either stay at secondary school or move from secondary school into further education, and it gave them that one-on-one support to keep them away from offending and making bad choices. I think that is probably one of the most successful programs that we have been able to roll out in regional Victoria. We have had quite a few programs which really have seen an opportunity for local people and councils to work with us as a state government to drive down crime in the local area by addressing the local needs.

Ms RICHARDS: You mentioned you have run the program twice. Did you make any changes to the program following the first round up until the second round?

Ms HUTCHINS: Yes. Some of the feedback that we had in the first round of the Crime Prevention Innovation Fund programs was from Aboriginal stakeholders who felt that they were not being included or had not been included at the start of the process. So we really worked hard through a self-determination lens to include the Aboriginal community at the heart of these grants. We have funded some great projects which really focus on addressing the needs of Aboriginal communities—for example, a \$300 000 project for Wathaurong Aboriginal Co-operative to create a culturally embedded healing place at Wathaurong. I was able to visit them. They did the most amazing work throughout the pandemic of engaging some of the young people in their community to work on making meals and delivering meals. It was the first contact that many of these young people had had with the co-op, and it was an opportunity for some of the workers there to engage those young people and to have them as part of an ongoing program. So they developed an Aboriginal cultural safety toolkit and resources that could be utilised across the justice sector, and they did that wholly and solely out of their organisation.

We also worked really closely with local RAJACs to make sure that the application processes that we have across our crime prevention grants—in particular, the innovation fund—were working well and were accessible. And given the over-representation of Aboriginal people in the justice system, this was a really important element to make sure we got right. The new funding target for the second round has been put in place so that Aboriginal groups have a sense of how much funding would be available for them to be able to apply for and the types of programs that can be successful in that grant process.

Ms RICHARDS: I would like to explore youth crime prevention grants, and I will move you on to budget paper 3, page 89. There is an allocation of \$4.5 million to prevent youth crime through early intervention, and I know that is something we have all been interested in. Could you explain what projects are funded through this and what the purpose is?

Ms HUTCHINS: Yes. You said page 89?

Ms RICHARDS: Yes.

Ms HUTCHINS: Certainly our youth crime prevention grants, again, have been community-led initiatives that support young people, and they have a real target around looking at the cohorts of young people that are most at risk, particularly between the ages of 10 to 24. These projects have run out across the state, and to date there have been more than 1300 young people who have received intensive one-on-one support through the program. We know that a majority of crime that young people commit is usually low level, and often something that they will grow out of. However, there is a small number of young people that commit a disproportionate amount of offences, and the youth crime prevention grants look at intensive support for those particular young people to build fulfilling lives and reduce harm that is caused by crime.

The aim of the project is to prevent crime by addressing it through causes for some of the most vulnerable people that get caught up in crime. There are a lot of challenges that they are facing: quite often substantial disadvantage, sometimes drug and alcohol addictions, sometimes mental health afflictions. It is all, unfortunately, part of the root causes of crime. It is fair to say that disadvantage is a significant factor, and these programs and projects are being designed to target that. The program has funded projects in 18 locations. It has given intensive support to those who have demonstrated risk of contact or further contact with the criminal justice system, and it works really hard to break down those risk factors so that they do not become entrenched in the rest of their lives.

Ms RICHARDS: Great. Thank you, Minister.

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

Mr BARTON: Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon, Minister. Maribyrnong Community Residential Facility—budget paper 3, page 97, outlines a number of initiatives for ‘Reducing future justice demand and keeping the community safe’. Part of this is the:

continued operation of the Maribyrnong Community Residential Facility, which provides short term accommodation ...for men exiting the prison system who would otherwise be at risk of homelessness

We know how important this is. Safe and secure housing is critical to rehab and future crime prevention. A University of Melbourne survey found that the prevalence of homelessness was about double for those who had contact with the criminal justice system, and in 2015 the Victorian Ombudsman estimated that 22 per cent of men and 44 per cent of women were homeless in Victoria even after receiving extensive post-prison support. My first question is: how much funding has the government allocated to this residential facility?

Ms HUTCHINS: Chair, I am happy to go into a bit more detail, but it does fall into my corrections portfolio. Whether in fact we can revisit that question later or—

The CHAIR: Yes, I think that would be most appropriate, Mr Barton, if we revisit it in the corrections portfolio, if that is okay.

Mr BARTON: Okay.

Ms HUTCHINS: But happy to talk about it.

Mr BARTON: Yes. Has the government got plans to expand the Maribyrnong facility or build additional facilities?

Ms HUTCHINS: Look, I can come back on the funding in the other portfolio area, but certainly the concept around having a residential facility such as Maribyrnong is because so many prisoners come out of prison at the end of their term into homelessness. This was a facility that we were able to stand up as a temporary facility during COVID. It is at the site of the old migrant detention centre in Maribyrnong, and it was fitted out by the corrections department to stand up this service. It absolutely makes a difference to driving down reoffending and recidivism. In fact we saw in our evaluation that 90 per cent of the men—and it is a men's facility—that went through this facility post sentence, on average, most of them for six months, did not reoffend, which is a much better result than our generic recidivism rates.

Would we like to build more of these facilities? Absolutely. Could the state benefit from a facility for women in this space? Yes, we would. That is not something that was addressed in this budget, but maybe in future budgets, and certainly I could not determine an unspecified location at this early stage for where that could be. But certainly we are getting the runs on the board from the results of this particular facility. It only has capacity to take 42 people at a time, and of course we know the release figures are a lot higher than that. I actually live two doors down from a rooming house and I have got to know a lot of the men that have come out of the prison system that live there. You can see without the wraparound services available on site how easy it is for some of these men, particularly living in the one location, having all been in prison at some stage of their lives or homeless—just how important the wraparound services are, and that is what a facility like Maribyrnong provides.

Mr BARTON: Absolutely. It is clear that they will end up back committing crimes. Are there any other initiatives or programs in this budget that seek to address the significant number of individuals leaving prison only to become homeless?

Ms HUTCHINS: Certainly our *Crime Prevention Strategy* is a big factor and looking at better ways we can coordinate the outreach of placement for prisoners leaving the system. We do have quite significant pathways that have been funded out of previous budgets and this budget for employment but also for housing placement. Again they are coordinated at the end of coming out of prison so are probably a bit more relatable to the corrections portfolio a bit later on, and I am happy to expand on that. But certainly I think it is worth highlighting that we have had a significant decrease in criminal offences and crimes—12.7 per cent, as I said in my presentation.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Barton. That concludes the time we have set aside for consideration of the crime prevention portfolio today. Thank you very much for appearing 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 now take a short break before moving to consideration of the corrections portfolio with you.

I declare this hearing adjourned.

Witnesses withdrew.