

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the 2022-23 Budget Estimates

Melbourne—Thursday, 19 May 2022

MEMBERS

Ms Lizzie Blandthorn—Chair

Mr Danny O'Brien—Deputy Chair

Mr Rodney Barton

Mr Sam Hibbins

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Mrs Beverley McArthur

Mr James Newbury

Ms Pauline Richards

Mr Tim Richardson

Ms Nina Taylor

WITNESSES

Mr Shaun Leane MLC, Minister for Veterans (*via videoconference*),

Ms Brigid Monagle, Associate Secretary,

Ms Louise Perry, Deputy Secretary, Fairer Victoria, Engagement and Coordination, and

Mr Anthony Plummer, 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 and 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 Leane, this time for the veterans affairs portfolio, and officers of your department. Minister, we invite you to make an opening statement, which will be followed by questions from the committee.

Visual presentation.

Mr LEANE: Thank you very much, Chair. Thanks to you and the committee for the opportunity to give an update on the veterans portfolio, including the 2022–23 Victorian budget, and their achievements over the past year. This year I have been focused on supporting veterans wellbeing, including employment initiatives and ensuring their service is acknowledged. We have worked across government on the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide. We have surpassed targets in the public sector employment program and begun work with the private sector as far as employment goes. We have provided support to the Victorian Veterans Council and the Shrine of Remembrance. We have delivered important funding to the veterans community through four grants programs: Restoring Community War Memorials and Avenues of Honour, Veterans Capital Works Grant Program, Anzac Day Proceeds Fund and Victoria Remembers Grant Program. Through these grants programs we have allocated \$1.71 million to 91 projects, including initiatives to protect our military heritage.

This year's budget delivers \$4.8 million over two years to support Victorian veterans. This year's budget includes five initiatives funded over two years: \$2.8 million for the continuation of the Veterans Capital Works Program to support building and facility improvements for not-for-profit organisations delivering services to veterans and their families; \$600 000 for the continuation of free public transport for veterans and related cohorts to attend commemorative events and events held during Veterans' Health Week; \$400 000 to partner with the Department of Education and Training to establish recognition of prior learning for qualifications and skills acquired in the Australian Defence Force; \$200 000 for the RSL Active program, which offers a program of events and activities for veterans to create and develop social networks, enhance support circles and improve mental and physical wellbeing; and \$810 000 for upgrades to the Mount Macedon Memorial Cross reserve.

This year we will focus on emerging issues that come out of the Royal Commission, the Veterans Sector Study and the Ex-Service Organisation Summit. We will increase engagement across government to ensure the needs

of veterans and their families are considered in planning of all government initiatives. We will review the findings and recommendations of the interim report of the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide, which is due in August this year. This is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to make real and lasting change in the way we support our veterans and their families. We have launched the new Victorian Veterans Council website, and, as I have stated before, we will run the first Ex-Service Organisation Summit in August. We will continue our successful public sector veterans employment strategy, and we will now focus on private sector jobs, with Jobs Victoria to offer tailored support to veterans and businesses seeking veteran employees through the Jobs Victoria online hub.

In this portfolio this year we have advocated—our government along of course with many others—for the joint commonwealth and state Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide, which was established on 8 July 2021. The health and wellbeing of our veterans with lived experience of mental health issues or suicide remains critical during this long and difficult process. In February we committed \$500 000 to deliver extra wellbeing support to veterans and their families in Victoria during the Royal Commission through Melbourne Legacy.

Last year the public sector veterans employment strategy exceeded the employment target, and we have now set a new target of 1500 veterans to be employed by June 2025. We have also launched a private sector strategy with Jobs Victoria. We announced an increase in the subsidy payable to the private sector employers of up to \$20 000 per veteran.

We continue to support the Shrine of Remembrance to deliver commemoration and education activities. Last year's budget allocated \$6 million over two years for repairs and restorations to the Shrine light towers, the monument stairs and ramp access from the upper to lower forecourts, with the works are well underway for completion in 2023. I will leave it there, thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. Deputy Chair.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Thank you, Chair. And, Minister, welcome back again. Can I start with the department—I am not sure, Ms Monagle, whether it is for you. Budget paper 3, page 209, shows a \$2 million cut in the revised budget figures from last year, which, according to the note, reflects the lapsing of the Shrine of Remembrance grant program as one of them. That program is not named as such in any previous budget papers. What was it and what did it do? How long did it run for?

Ms MONAGLE: Thank you. I might pass that one—

Mr LEANE: I am happy to jump in there, if that is okay.

Mr D O'BRIEN: If I get the answer, Minister, yes.

Mr LEANE: I think it is probably easier to go to page 197 and the outputs for support of veterans in Victoria. Actually, opening this up, Mr O'Brien, you will see that from the last budget, which was \$12.6 million, this year's amount in the budget papers is reduced to \$11.5 million. Can I say, similar to a conversation we had for a previous portfolio, that the \$810 000 for the Mount Macedon Memorial Cross reserve improvements are in contingency as well. So therefore—

Mr D O'BRIEN: Okay. Sorry, Minister. I am just after some information on the Shrine of Remembrance grant program. That is all I wanted to know.

Mr LEANE: Well, what I can say is there is none—

Mr D O'BRIEN: It has lapsed, and I wanted to know what it was and how much it was.

Mr LEANE: I can say that we have not cut any grants program. We have maintained—

Mr D O'BRIEN: No, no. I did not ask about it being cut. It says in the budget papers that it 'reflects the lapsing of the Shrine of Remembrance grant program'. With respect, Minister, this is why I asked the department, because we are 2½ minutes in and I am no closer to answering the question. I just want to know what it was and how much it was.

Mr LEANE: As I stated in the presentation, last year there was \$6 million awarded to the Shrine as far as capital improvements with the light towers and the stairs and others go. That was over two years. There is \$3 million this year for those ongoing works, which will be completed by 2023.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Okay. Likewise, the same note suggests there is lapsing of additional funding provided to the Anzac Day Proceeds Fund. Now, that actually helps a range of welfare-related issues. What is going to be reduced as a result of the lack of subsidy for that program this year, in terms of programs for veterans?

Mr LEANE: Once again, that is not a program that has been cut at all.

Mr D O'BRIEN: No, no. There was more money in it last year; there is less money in it this year. That is all I am asking.

Mr LEANE: The Anzac Day Proceeds Fund comes from sporting events on Anzac Day, and there is a proportion that comes out of those events. I think it is one-thirtieth of the funds that are generated on Anzac Day because of certain sporting events. It usually ends up a figure—and I am happy to take this on notice, Mr O'Brien—and I will get you the figure that it usually ends up a pretty constant figure around.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Thank you.

Mr LEANE: We will get that to you. I can guarantee you, Mr O'Brien, that is still in place and that it does a great job in supporting—

Mr D O'BRIEN: I know it is still in place. I am not suggesting that it has been removed. But last year there was money for it, this year there is not, and I just wanted to know what is going to be reduced. I might move on, but as I do could I perhaps ask, Mr Plummer, could I just get on notice what the Shrine of Remembrance grant program total funding was and over how many years et cetera and an explanation of what it did?

Mr PLUMMER: Sure.

Mr D O'BRIEN: That would be great.

Mr PLUMMER: The minister is correct. It is an ongoing program.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Okay, but it actually says it is a lapsing program.

Mr PLUMMER: A component of it lapsed because it was an injection for COVID-related issues that the veterans sector was facing. So there was an additional amount put into the proceeds fund, and that was just a time-limited period for last year.

Mr D O'BRIEN: So the Shrine of Remembrance has an ongoing grants program for it?

Mr PLUMMER: No, I am talking about the Anzac Day Proceeds Fund.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Sorry, no, the question was about the Shrine of Remembrance program.

Mr PLUMMER: Right.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Sorry, when I came to you I was going back to the start. Sorry for the confusion. I appreciate the Anzac Day Proceeds Fund is ongoing. The Shrine of Remembrance grant program—if I could get how much there was in total for that, over what period and what exactly it achieved.

Mr PLUMMER: Yes.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Just to confirm, that is a lapsing program now?

Ms MONAGLE: The government funds the shrine every year for operational funding each year, so it is ongoing, but it is a small proportion—

Mr D O'BRIEN: There was a grants program—

Ms MONAGLE: so we can get that to you.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Yes, okay. Can I continue perhaps with the department—and the minister talked about the veterans public sector employment program. It is a little bit confusing, I might say, in the budget papers, because by my read of it—and before the minister jumps in—the target was for 750 veterans employed in the public sector but the expected outcome for 2021–22 is only 188. Can you explain what that is? Is it simply that that is a target for 2025? In which case—

Mr PLUMMER: It is like that, Mr O'Brien. The target was over a four-year period. So we have surpassed the initial target, which was 750, to employ 766 veterans, and the minister has set now a new target for 2025 of another 750, bringing the total people employed in the VPS who are veterans to 1500 by that point.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Okay. So we see the actual for 2020–21 was 766, so that is more than 750.

Mr PLUMMER: The cumulative total.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Okay. I would suggest to you perhaps that the budget paper there on page 209 is a bit confusing, and perhaps there should at least be a note that sort of explains that a bit further.

Mr LEANE: If I could just jump in there and just further expand on the public sector employment program and the new target. Major General David McLachlan does a fantastic job, and he is the advocate for this particular program and does a wonderful job, I have got to say. He approached me about setting a target for 2025 which he believes we can reach quite successfully, so as far as any sort of annual targets go I think with the great work of Major General McLachlan and others that we usually surpass that target.

Mr D O'BRIEN: And that is great, Minister, genuinely. We do support that. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr O'Brien. Your time has expired. Ms Richards.

Ms RICHARDS: Thank you, Minister and officials, for your time this afternoon. I would like to explore the veterans capital works program and particularly refer you to budget paper 3, page 39, which outlines the funding of \$2.8 million for the continuation of the veterans capital works program. Can you please explain for the committee's benefit the benefits and importance of these grants to the ex-service community in Victoria?

Mr LEANE: Thanks for the question, Pauline. I think that it is a really important grant program. The stream offers grants of \$5000 up to \$50 000, available for projects to support building facility improvements, for not-for-profit organisations delivering services to veterans and their families. As I said, it has been quite a successful program and a popular program with the veterans community. If you do not mind, Pauline, I think I might use examples from the previous round of funding to explain where this funding goes, and probably the answer to your question is that from this new round of funding in this budget we hope for more of the same, because it has done some great work.

If I could just give you an example of recent Veterans Capital Works Program funding from last year's budget, Goorambat Veterans Retreat, which is in Victoria's north, received \$50 000 to refurbish an old school building and create crisis accommodation for veterans and their families dealing with challenges such as financial hardship. You know, \$50 000 to refurbish an old school building in that part of Victoria for veterans that find their way in hard times is just a fantastic use of this particular fund, and I really want to commend the group that is enacting that.

I was actually lucky enough to be at the Oakleigh-Carnegie RSL sub-branch, and there is a lot of good work done by RSL sub-branches in supporting veterans. They received just over \$30 000 from the last round of funding to turn an unused area of the RSL into a library and meeting room that is just for veterans and their families. They explained to me that some veterans that really enjoy coming to the Oakleigh RSL sometimes feel that they need to have a quiet quarter of an hour to get away, and that is what they are going to create in this particular space.

Another one was that the Clunes RSL sub-branch was funded \$50 000 to undertake urgent slate roof repairs on its heritage-listed building. I have not been to this particular RSL sub-branch, but it sounds like it is a fantastic building. And having a heritage-listed building—I understand the expense of that sub-branch being able to

make those roof repairs and keep the building operational—without this funding it would be really hard for them to continue to do the good work out of that facility that they do.

So I think that this fund is always very popular when we put out applications for it, and I am really pleased that we are continuing it in this year's budget, because it has proved to be quite important to a number of, as I said, particularly RSL sub-branches but others. Melbourne Legacy have utilised it. There is an organisation called Carry On that specialises in housing for veterans; they have utilised it. So I think that we really look forward to the next round of funding being as successful as the last round.

Ms RICHARDS: Thanks so much for that. It would be interesting perhaps, using the same budget reference and the same program, to understand a little bit more how this initiative fits in with the wider Victorian government program for ex-service personnel and their families. I know this is something you have been really passionate about with your ministerial responsibilities.

Mr LEANE: Yes. Some of the groups I have managed to interact I have just mentioned. But also interacting with a lot of people from the veteran community, I decided that we should have a whole-of-government veterans policy. I took a submission to the cabinet after being in this position for a few months that we should be putting a whole-of-government lens on how we can best assist veterans and their families, particularly the younger, sort of contemporary veterans and family members. It is a very sad thing that there is a Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide. We just think that we could do a framework that focuses on things that are really important to that community, that contemporary group, like employment, mental wellbeing and homelessness. We are going to take a lot out of the Ex-Service Organisation Summit later this year. We are going to take a lot out of the interim report of the Royal Commission. We are doing a Victorian Veterans Sector Study as well, which has been really well received.

But what we have taken out of this originally are things like employment. Ex-servicemen and women are absolute assets, and we want them here in Victoria. There should not be any of them that are struggling to find work. Unfortunately there is a bit of a convoluted way, I think, where someone who is a plumber in the defence forces comes out of the defence forces and in the private world is not necessarily considered a plumber because their qualifications do not always match. I am not just picking out plumbers; I am just saying as an example that we are going to do some good work with the Department of Employment and Training about prior learning, because it just seems crazy that someone should be in that situation where they are actually overqualified in some cases but those qualifications are not being recognised in the private world. The work we have done with Jobs Victoria is we have set up an internet hub where employers can put expressions of interest for jobs that they want to prioritise veterans for, and veterans can register on that portal as well. It is also a credit to Minister Pulford that the wage subsidy for employers that employ a veteran who has been unemployed has moved up to \$20 000—so you get an absolute asset and you get \$20 000.

Housing is one of the areas that was brought up to me when I first came into this position. We have been working with a group called Carry On. They have put in an application to be a registered housing provider, particularly with Homes Victoria. They have actually got a subsidiary entity now, Veteran Housing Australia, and they are actually the first registered housing provider that is solely looking at providing housing for veterans and family members. So that has been some great work we have been able to do as well. I suppose, Pauline, getting back to it, we want to work on areas that are tangible and actually matter and also of course respect the very important commemorative days and respect the service of a number of men and women right through our military history that deserve all of our respect.

Ms RICHARDS: Thank you. Just in the short amount of time I have got left, I am interested in understanding why it is important that we provide opportunities to attract ex-service personnel to Victoria.

Mr LEANE: I mean, they are absolute assets, and we should be going out of our way to attract them to Victoria. I think about 6000 members leave the defence forces each year—it might be a bit less—and normally about 500 make Victoria their home when they come back, whether they were originally here or they make it their new home. But things like this employment initiative are really important because we actually want to attract them to our great state. Their skills are amazing, and employers that I speak to would employ veterans just on their attributes alone given their health and safety, ability to work in a team, punctuality and being able to be asked to do things without being unhappy. As I said, Pauline, they are just absolute assets, and anything we can do to support veterans in this way we will continue to do.

Mr RICHARDSON: Great. Thanks so much.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. Mr Barton.

Mr BARTON: Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon, Minister. Minister, in budget paper 3, on page 39 and in the expanded information on page 51, there are initiatives to support veteran transition and wellbeing. There appears to be \$300 000 each year for two years. Could you please explain the breakdown of the funding and how the transport component works?

Mr LEANE: Thank you, Mr Barton. Let me get to that page. Thank you, Mr Barton, for the question. I think when I answered Pauline I spoke about the partnership with the Department of Education and Training to deliver recognition of prior learning for qualifications for skills acquired in the defence force. So, in that component, \$400 000 out of the \$600 000 over two years is allocated to that, and that aim is to support veterans' pathways through employment. I think I did outline it in quite some detail to Pauline—but I think that it is really important work. Also making up that \$600 000 over two years is the \$100 000 over two years for the RSL Active program, which is a great program that supports a lot of veterans in getting out and doing activities that are great for their health and mental wellbeing.

If I could go to the transport component, Mr Barton, this is administered by the transport department, but it is for the benefit of veterans, so it comes under this category. There is \$600 000 for the public transport for veterans program, which supports the funding of free transport for veterans and war widows, school students, Australian Defence Cadets, Girl Guides and Scouts for veteran-related events such as Anzac Day, Remembrance Day and Vietnam Veterans Day in August, and also there is free public transport for veterans during Veterans Health Week, which is in October.

And if I could just go back, if you do not mind, I did say provision of free public transport in some of the categories like Girl Guides and Scouts. It is important that in particular on Anzac Day in the march they are the kind young people that volunteer to carry the banners in front of the different groups of veterans, so that is why they have been included in that. Also these programs complement other programs, and I know programs that you have a great interest in, Mr Barton, such as veterans who are eligible for the multipurpose taxi program.

Mr BARTON: Thank you, Minister. In the veteran transition support, how many veterans are expected to access the service, and how can they access this service?

Mr LEANE: Yes. Are you talking about the public transport component, Rod?

Mr BARTON: No, the veteran transition and wellbeing initiative—how big is that?

Mr LEANE: Can I get back to you on that? I cannot quote for you a figure at this point or what the aspiration is. So can I get back to you—on notice—on that, if that is okay, Mr Barton?

Mr BARTON: Thank you, Minister. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Barton. That concludes the time we have got set aside for consideration of the veterans estimates today.

Thank you, Minister and your team, 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.

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. Thank you.

Committee adjourned.