

# **PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE**

## **Inquiry into the 2022-23 Budget Estimates**

Melbourne—Monday, 6 June 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 Gabrielle Williams MP, Minister for Women,

Ms Brigid Monagle, Associate Secretary,

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

Ms Jo Pride, 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 Williams, this time for the women's portfolio. We invite you to make an opening statement. This will be followed by questions from the committee.

**Ms WILLIAMS:** Thank you, Chair. Before I begin, please let me also acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we are gathered, the Wurundjeri people, and pay my respects to their elders past and present and any other elders we have here with us today, and to also introduce my departmental colleagues who are with me today. To my left is Brigid Monagle, and to my right, Louise Perry and Jo Pride, who will be assisting and available for questions as well.

**Visual presentation.**

**Ms WILLIAMS:** To start the presentation and flip through to slide 2, from Australia's first *Gender Equality Act* to gender-responsive budgeting, Victoria is leading the nation on gender equality. Since coming to government we have demonstrated an unwavering commitment to progressing gender equality and improving outcomes for every woman in every setting and at every stage of life. We are proud of our ambitious gender equality agenda, reflected in this year's budget, which invests around \$240 million in initiatives that will continue our nation-leading work to end family and gendered violence and build a better future for Victorian women. We know that we are faced with a once-in-a-generation opportunity to address entrenched gender inequalities that have been exacerbated by the pandemic. The fact is that the pandemic not only threatened recent progress on gender equality, but it also put us backwards on some measures. In 2021 the gender pay gap widened for the first time in seven years to 14.2 per cent nationally, and only one of 23 CEO appointments to ASX 300 boards was female. Women disproportionately felt the financial stress of the pandemic. Women were already over-represented in low-paid and insecure work and were more likely to be unemployed and almost twice as likely to be underemployed. Women suffered more job losses during the pandemic, and many women juggled more work than ever at home, teaching and caring for children alongside of course their paid employment responsibilities as well. While economic activity has bounced back and women's workforce participation is back above prepandemic levels at 62.1 per cent, the pandemic highlighted the fragile nature of gender equality progress and showed us that there is more to be done.

The Victorian government is committed to this work and to achieving gender equality and improving outcomes for all women and indeed, through gender equality, all Victorians. That is why we are developing a new Victorian gender equality strategy, due for release later this year, that will embed gains made under *Safe and Strong*, which was our first gender equality strategy, and provide a framework for future investment and reform in a COVID-recovery environment. In order to improve outcomes for women we know that we must consider and address structural barriers to gender equality that exist across government and the community, and that is exactly what this strategy will do.

We must ensure a gender lens is applied to government decisions and investments so that our policies do not unintentionally reinforce gender inequalities. That is why we are continuing to invest in the implementation of the nation-leading *Gender Equality Act* as the first and only jurisdiction in Australia to have enshrined gender equality in law. We are embedding gender-responsive budgeting across government and considering and addressing the gendered impacts of our investments, and by supporting the public sector to undertake gender impact assessments under the GE Act we are strengthening gender-responsive budgeting across government. We will also continue to improve leadership opportunities for women and address the structural barriers to women's leadership, because we know with a woman at every table in every room we see better outcomes for everyone.

I might just jump to the next slide. Reflecting on the last year, I am pleased to report that this work will build on a strong foundation of structural reforms. In 2021 we maintained gender parity on paid government boards, increasing the percentage of women to 55 per cent, up from 39 per cent back in March 2015. By June 2022 all organisations in scope of the GE Act will have submitted their first workplace gender audits and their gender equality action plans—GEAPs, as we know them—impacting over 12 per cent of Victoria's workforce, some 435 000 employees. This is a significant achievement for the first round of reporting under the Act. It demonstrates the public sector's commitment to progressing gender equality in their workplaces and advancing gender-equal outcomes through their policies, programs and services.

We launched the groundbreaking Victorian women's public art program as well to address the under-representation of women and their achievements in public art across Victoria. We invested \$1 million in women's leadership programs, supporting more than 130 women through initiatives to address structural barriers for women of colour, rural women, young women and First Nations women. We invested \$1.1 million in programs to support women to overcome barriers to economic security, anticipated to benefit more than 800 women. And in establishing the gender-responsive budgeting unit, we have embedded consideration of the gendered impacts of investment decisions through the state budget process, which again is the first of its kind in Australia but we hope not the last.

In terms of the next slide, the 2022–23 budget invests \$8.4 million over three years to support gender equality. This includes \$3.1 million to implement new initiatives under the new gender equality strategy; \$2.7 million for upgrades to the *Gender Equality Act's* reporting platform and to develop a dispute resolution case management system; and \$2.4 million for training, education and resources to conduct gender impact assessments across government, because to ensure truly equal outcomes we must analyse the gendered impacts of our work. Finally, there is an allocation of \$200 000 to deliver the women of colour leadership program, continuing our work to support opportunities for diverse women leaders. While we have a long way to go, I think there is a lot to be proud of, and we will continue to make the bold and progressive policy decisions that are needed to improve outcomes for women across Victoria.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** Are you finished, Minister?

**Ms WILLIAMS:** Yes.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** This has never happened, let alone when I have been the acting Chair. The Chair just had to step out for a moment to deal with an issue, so I will pass the call to the Deputy Chair. Thank you, Minister. Thank you for coming.

**Ms RICHARDS:** How long have you got, sorry?

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** Five minutes. Thank you. I do not think a minister has ever actually come that far short in their portfolio. Minister, budget paper 3, page 197, indicates a 15 per cent cut to the women's policy

budget in this year's budget. What programs are not going to be funded or will be downgraded as a result of that cut?

**Ms WILLIAMS:** Firstly, I think it is worth pointing out, as we have previously, that the responsibility in the women's portfolio is a whole-of-government responsibility. So you cannot judge the investment from my portfolio alone. In fact if you look at our women's budget statement and the assessment of the impact of gender-responsive budgeting and the investment across government, we are looking at something in the order of \$940 million for initiatives to support better outcomes for women, and what we have seen is other portfolios also stepping up and taking some responsibility for different areas of gender equality proportions and initiatives.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** That is all well and good, Minister, but there is specifically—and it is literally there in the budget papers—a 14.8 per cent reduction in the women's policy budget. So the question stands as to what programs will be cut as result of that reduction.

**Ms WILLIAMS:** Look, there are no lapsing programs in the women's portfolio. It is important to note that in the last couple of years there have been some one-off COVID boosts that are not required from here on in, and effectively the need has been captured in other areas of government that have then stepped into that space. For example, in terms of those which were COVID-specific investment, there was the COVID-19 women's mental health support fund, which was provided to women's health services, of \$600 000 last year, but that has effectively been replaced by the \$19.4 million provided in this budget for women's health services, which is largely out of the Minister for Health's responsibilities. You also would have seen in last year's budget support for single mother families through COVID-19 specifically through funding of \$250 000 to the Council of Single Mothers and their Children. This one-off funding recognised the particular burden of lockdowns on single mothers, but given that we are no longer in a lockdown environment, that funding has now not been required for the purposes for which it was assigned last year. It is also worth noting, in the 2018–19 state budget, 'Improving gender equality in Victorian communities', which invested \$9.6 million over four years from 2018–19 to 2020–21. This was previous funding for *Safe and Strong*, which may appear in what you are seeing. However, that is previous funding for that previous strategy, which is being revised, as I outlined in my opening remarks, and is being supported through a new allocation of \$8.4 million from this budget, albeit not framed with the same branding, effectively. So that is going into what we are crafting.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** Okay. Can I go specifically to the women's policy outputs? So on page 211 the number of people participating in funded gender equality programs has dropped by nearly 10 000, and the explanation is that it is a change from having an online delivery of some of these programs back to in person. But why not continue to do that? If you had so much engagement from online programs, why not continue both?

**Ms WILLIAMS:** So that inflated number is because, as you have identified, of that online delivery. That has increased our target, from memory, in this financial year to take into account our increased capacity for online delivery from here on in. Of course, as we move into a COVID recovery frame, obviously what we have learned is we have got a greater capacity to provide online, but that does not mean that everyone will still choose to do these programs online. But we have obviously boosted our target to accommodate that increased online capacity while also knowing that it may not be at the same levels as we saw last year, because some people will opt to still do those programs face to face.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** Okay. Can I ask: on 10 July last year you and the Treasurer announced the development of an inquiry into economic equity for Victorian women, which indicated that it would be handed to you in January. Has that report been finalised?

**Ms WILLIAMS:** Yes, that report has been finalised. Just bear with me.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** I may have to come back to you.

**Ms WILLIAMS:** No, no, no, that is okay. Sorry, I just wanted to confirm one small fact on that. Yes, the report has been finalised and has been passed on to both me and the Treasurer. We are currently considering that and will respond to it soon.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR:** I will come back to you. Ms Richards.

**Ms RICHARDS:** Thank you, Deputy Chair. Thank you, Minister and departmental officials, for your time here this afternoon and for your important work in this portfolio. I would like to refer you to budget paper 3, page 39, and I am interested in understanding the implementation of the *Gender Equality Act* and how that will improve gender equality in Victorian workplaces and the Victorian community more broadly.

**Ms WILLIAMS:** Yes, sure. Thank you, Ms Richards, for that question. I know this is a development that you are incredibly supportive of and have advocated heavily on both in your local community and in the Parliament. I do not think I need to tell you that Victoria leads the nation in gender equality. We are the first and only jurisdiction in Australia to have enshrined that gender equality in law through the *Gender Equality Act*. It is an important reform and will improve outcomes for women but also for all Victorians in support of our vision to build a state where everybody has equal power, resources and access to opportunities.

The Victorian budget this year invests \$5.1 million over three years to implement the GE Act. This includes \$2.7 million over three years to support the GE Act reporting platform and also a further \$2.4 million over three years for training, education and resources to embed gender impact assessments across the public sector. The Act will improve workplace gender equality across the VPS and state entities, public sector entities, including of course universities and local councils, with flow-on tangible benefits for our whole community through the work of those entities. It does that by requiring the public sector to measure, to also publicly report and to demonstrate meaningful progress against key gender equality indicators. The indicators include things like, for example, gender pay equity, gender composition at all levels of the workforce, gender composition of governing bodies, workplace sexual harassment, recruitment and promotion, gendered workforce segregation, leave and also flexibility, and on all of these indicators we know we need to see more progress.

There is currently a 9.3 per cent gender pay gap across the Victorian public sector. Nationally that gender pay gap sits higher, at 13.8 per cent, and we saw it blow out a bit last year as well, so we have got some work to do in bringing that down. For those who may not be aware, the gender pay gap measure effectively measures the difference between the average earnings of women and men in the workforce. It is an internationally established measure of women's position in the economy in comparison to men. The gender pay gap is a result of social and economic factors that combine to reduce women's earning capacity over our lifetime, including things like unequal workforce participation, discrimination and occupational and industrial segregation—issues that will be familiar to many of us, particularly women, in this place and issues which, again, I know, Ms Richards, you have been active in advocating on.

In Australia women continue to be over-represented in low-paid, insecure work and under-represented in leadership roles. That over-representation in low-paid, insecure work was a large part of the reason that we saw women so severely hit by the pandemic and the economic impacts of that. It was no coincidence. We were starting from a different starting point from the outset, which obviously means that we feel those sorts of economic shocks differently. Women continue to retire with almost half the superannuation savings of men, and that is despite the fact that we live longer on average. Women still undertake almost double the unpaid care and domestic responsibilities when compared with men, and this means that women are less likely to participate in the workforce. If they do, they are significantly more likely to take up flexible work arrangements—that is, casual and part-time work—which, as I have outlined, is why things like the pandemic and other types of economic shock have such a disproportionate impact on women and the reason why many of these inequities were only exacerbated over the past couple of years, and that is shown in the data. As an employer, though, of over 340 000 Victorians—I think earlier I might have said 430 000, so I will correct that; it is 340 000—the Victorian public sector has an opportunity to lead by example and address the systemic drivers of gender inequality within the workforce. Since the commencement of the GE Act in March of last year the Commission for Gender Equality in the Public Sector has been supporting over 300 defined entities—so those public sector entities defined under the Act—to make progress on gender equality, covering, as I have outlined, hundreds of thousands of employees that constitute roughly around 12 per cent of the workforce. One hundred per cent of organisations, we now know, have submitted their workplace gender audit data, which has provided some really important information that will be used as a starting point for measuring that progress on gender equality as the Act continues to bear fruit.

**Ms RICHARDS:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Mr Barton.

**Mr BARTON:** Thank you, Chair. Also on the *Gender Equality Act*, budget paper 3, page 39, notes funding will be provided to implement the *Gender Equality Act*. Minister, how is the government supporting implementation of the *Gender Equality Act* for defined entities in the Eastern Metropolitan Region like Manningham City Council?

**Ms WILLIAMS:** Thank you, Mr Barton. As you have observed, the council is a defined entity under the Act, and Manningham City Council are of course captured within that. They are, as I have just outlined, one of about 300 defined entities that are required to show progress on gender equality in the workplace and consider the gendered impact of their programs and services, and I have got to say, that is a part of this regime that I find most interesting, which is how we can look at the work of these entities and what the impact and sometimes unintended consequences are of the policies and programs that we invest in and that those entities invest in. I think there is, alongside gender-responsive budgeting, an enormous opportunity for us to really see gains and efficiencies in our investments as a product of that work.

The Commission for Gender Equality in the Public Sector provides implementation support to those defined entities to meet their obligation under the Act. The commission does this by providing really tailored support to organisations through things like workshops, detailed guidance materials and through the commissioner's various engagements with individual entities, really working with them to achieve that progress. It is a collaborative approach; it is not a punitive approach, and it was very clear from the outset that that is what we wanted this to be. We understood that across those 300 entities organisations were at different places and therefore needed that kind of tailored response to work through what their next steps should be to ensure that, no matter where entities were starting, they were continuing to make progress over time.

Under the Act defined entities are required to collect workplace gender equality data against a range of different measures including the gender pay gap, sexual harassment and gender segregation in their workforces. As at May—so very recent data, as I have outlined previously—all of those defined entities, including councils within the Eastern Metro Region, have submitted their gender audit data, providing that important information that will be used as a starting point for measuring progress on gender equality. It is really that baseline data that we need to now progress from. It is a really significant achievement, particularly given this is the first year doing this, and I think it demonstrates the commitment of those public sector entities, including councils and universities, to progress gender equality. It also highlights the importance of resourcing the commission to provide that implementation support. I doubt that we would have got such a strong response without the work of the commissioner and the commission to be able to support those organisations to meet their responsibilities, to know what they have to do and to do that to the best of their ability.

That is why this budget invests that \$5.1 million over three years to implement that Act, and that is of course on top of the \$13.4 million that was invested in the 2020–21 budget to implement the Act to establish the commission, and this new investment will really support the public sector organisations to embed those gender impact assessments as a core part of their business—as business as usual, effectively—ensuring that our government programs and services lead to more equitable outcomes and that those workplaces themselves are reflecting the equality that we want to see across our community. It will also support the development of the reporting platform that will improve the collection, analysis and reporting of gender equality data, providing a comprehensive, transparent picture of the state of gender equality in the Victorian public sector. We are committed to supporting the commission with its resource needs, to supporting the public sector to make those meaningful changes and to driving that progress on gender equality, which we know will lead to better outcomes not only for women but, it also should be said, for all Victorians, because if you look at some of these measures, whether it be workplace flexibility or indeed the take-up of parental leave, we know some of those measures indeed affect men in the workforce as well. There has been some interesting data over the years emerge about the stigma attached to men requesting parental leave, which of course makes men less likely to request it, and in some workplaces they are less likely to receive authorisation to take it. And that is a real problem too, because if we are going to talk about equality in the workplace and the equality that it then enables in the home life, then we need to be making sure that those opportunities are equally available but also equally taken up by men as well as women in the workforce. That is a really important part of this work.

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

**Ms RICHARDS:** Thanks, Minister, again. Thank you, Chair. As you know better than anyone, in my electorate we have a wonderful particularly culturally diverse community, and in our state more broadly half of

Victorians were either born overseas or have a parent who was born overseas. I note in budget paper 3, page 39, the output description outlines that funding is provided to implement the *Gender Equality Act*, and I am interested in understanding how this implementation will consider and respond to the needs of Victoria's diverse population.

**Ms WILLIAMS:** Thanks, Ms Richards. I am well familiar with the make-up of your community, given it looks very similar to the make-up of mine, and in fact we have often been given cause to reflect on the fact that in any four-year electoral period we are probably looking at the same people, because many move from my area to yours. And I know that you share my sentiment, as a local MP in particular representing a very diverse community, that our multiculturalism is without doubt one of our greatest strengths. We know it makes us vibrant. It is a place that is incredibly welcoming, and particularly our local communities, for those who are newly arrived and those seeking to find their place in a new country. But in saying that, and noting Victoria's diversity as a whole—50 per cent of Victorians were either born overseas or have a parent born overseas, so it is who we are; it is not sort of a fringe element of our community, it is very much a core element of our community—it is really important that we ensure that every Victorian has equal access to opportunities but also to the services in our state and that we can meet their needs holistically and drive better outcomes across all parts of our community.

Unfortunately, though, we know that that is not always the case. Gender inequality remains an issue in Victoria and has widespread economic and social impacts, and we know that not all women feel those impacts equally. For example, migrant and refugee women face additional barriers, and that is something that is probably very obvious to you and me and others on the committee in the communities that we represent. Women from culturally diverse backgrounds we know, for example, are over-represented in insecure, low-paid work—women as a starting point are, but we know that women from culturally diverse backgrounds are, on top that, even more over-represented in insecure and low-paid work. They make up about one-third of Australia's direct-care workforce as well, so not only are they in often precarious employment but we are also very dependent on them to do that work. And we should be probably more reminded of that in the recovery phase of the pandemic than we have ever been before, where for many of these workforces our broader community was deeply dependent on them in one of the most challenging times of our existence, particularly in the last generation and probably particularly the last 100 years.

Migrant and refugee women are also under-represented, we know, in leadership. In 2020 just 5.2 per cent of all positions on ASX boards were held by men or women from non-English-speaking backgrounds—5.2 per cent. When you think about the proportion of our population that is from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, that is pretty stark and reminds us that our boardroom tables, our leadership decision-making tables, are not reflecting our community to the extent that they need to. So in order to progress towards a more gender-equal society we must also recognise that gender inequality does not impact all people the same way and that for many the impact of gender inequality is compounded by the way that gender barriers interact with other forms of discrimination and disadvantage—race, Aboriginality, religious beliefs or activity, disability, age, sexual orientation or indeed gender identity. So the *Gender Equality Act* requires organisations to consider the way that gender intersects with other forms of disadvantage when developing strategies and measures to promote gender equality. So the Act seeks to improve opportunities and outcomes for all women—it has always been very clear on that objective—with a focus, though, on women who are more likely to experience disadvantage. As I have outlined, the pandemic has really highlighted that structural disadvantage embedded in our community leaves our most disadvantaged even more vulnerable to those economic shocks and with that threatens the prosperity of our whole community. So it is really important that we continue to take systemic and strategic measures to address inequality within our community so that we can create those safer, stronger and fairer communities that we are all committed to building. But is also why the budget invests that \$5.1 million over three years in the implementation of the *Gender Equality Act* to make sure that its benefits are being felt by everybody in our community and that we have a particular eye to those compounding issues that might actually serve to entrench and worsen the levels of disadvantage people are experiencing.

**Ms RICHARDS:** Thank you, Minister.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Deputy Chair.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Thank you, Chair. Can I go back, Minister, to the inquiry into economic equity for Victorian women that you mentioned. So you had a copy of it.

**Ms WILLIAMS:** Yes.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** It was scheduled to be handed to you and the Treasurer in January by the announcement. In fact it still says that on the DTF website. When did you actually get it?

**Ms WILLIAMS:** Get that report? Look, I received that earlier this year, and as I said it is currently, between the Treasurer and me, being analysed so that we can develop our response. As I flagged earlier, we have got a gender equality strategy due to be released later in this year. It is very shortly, actually, I think. That strategy will form a significant part of our response to the inquiry, which is what we have been working on. I would love to be able to say more comprehensively what that will include, but given it has not yet been launched, that might have to be something I speak to at a future PAEC should I still be here, Mr O'Brien.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Not coming back, Minister?

**Ms WILLIAMS:** But, as you may imagine, the work of that inquiry, led by Carol Schwartz, was incredibly deep and broad ranging. There has been a lot in it to have a look at—I think I am on safe ground to at least reveal that much—and we are looking forward to being able to realise its ambition and take forward the recommendations that it has made and continue to work not only within government but also within other sectors in the community to try and realise those ambitions as well.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Both your media release with the Treasurer in July last year and the DTF website still say:

It is intended that the findings and recommendations of this Inquiry will feed into the 2022–23 ... Budget.

Did it feed into it at all? What recommendations, what policies, have been adopted as a result of that inquiry?

**Ms WILLIAMS:** Well, as I have outlined previously, I think I already mentioned that we have got an allocation in this year's budget towards that next gender equality strategy, and that will include meeting many of the recommendations from this inquiry. So you are effectively seeing some of that investment, being effectively a down payment on that new strategy, and that will pick up a significant part of the work out of that inquiry, and we are continuing to work to finalise that right now. So in coming days, weeks and months, I think you will get the answer to your question that you are seeking.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** So you received it in January—is that right?

**Ms WILLIAMS:** Look, I do not have the exact date in front of me.

**Ms MONAGLE:** It was around—

**Ms WILLIAMS:** Around about, yes, 14 Jan.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** So why hasn't it been released publicly?

**Ms WILLIAMS:** Because we are still working through our response to it. When we are able to release our response, as I have outlined—there is a really significant body of work in that, and we have been working closely with the inquiry team themselves to both get a better understanding of their findings in the work that they have been doing, and that has been a very collaborative process, and also do the work within government to make sure that we are putting forward a really solid response to that inquiry's report. These things sometimes, Mr O'Brien, can take time, and we are really dedicated to getting it right.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Can the committee have a copy of the report?

**Ms WILLIAMS:** What was that, sorry?

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Can the committee have a copy of the report?

**Ms WILLIAMS:** The committee can have a copy of the report when it is publicly available.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Worth a try. Minister, can I just go to the questionnaire. It is actually the Department of Health questionnaire but it touches on what you were talking about earlier, and that is gender-responsive

budgeting. I note that in the questionnaire, of page 139, 'Barwon Women's and Children's Hospital', there is a note there that says gender impact assessments:

... have not yet been undertaken for asset initiatives funded through the 2022–23 ... Budget.

Why is that, particularly for something like that? And another one was 'Improving safety in mental health intensive care'—so obviously very female-focused issues. What is going on with the gender impact assessments?

**Ms WILLIAMS:** In terms of those investments within—what, the first one was the Barwon women's hospital. What was the second one you mentioned, sorry?

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Improving safety in mental health intensive care areas.

**Ms WILLIAMS:** The mental health system?

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** I appreciate they are not your portfolio—

**Ms WILLIAMS:** No, no. That's right.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** but gender impact assessments and gender-responsive budgeting presumably are.

**Ms WILLIAMS:** But again, Mr O'Brien, gender-responsive budgeting and gender impact assessments are responsibilities of the whole government, so I would deal with the entities within my portfolio. Those responsible ministers and their departments would then oversee the gender impact assessments and the gender-responsive budgeting aspects within their portfolios and those processes. You are best to direct those questions in that instance to the Minister for Health and the Minister for Mental Health, who would be able to explain why at that point in time those assessments were not done. From the outline you have just given me, it sounds like it is an issue of timing rather than anything else.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** No, none of them have been done.

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

**Ms TAYLOR:** Thank you. Thinking about the fact that, you know, with all the sort of cultural change and particularly the bold reforms that need to occur under the *Gender Equality Act*, it is important organisations are supported to make the necessary changes to be able to progress gender equality. If I can just refer you to the performance measures in budget paper 3, page 211, which shows the target for 'Tools, resources and guidelines to support ... implementation' with the Act was achieved. How is the government supporting defined entities such as councils—local government—to prepare for the implementation of the Act?

**Ms WILLIAMS:** Sure. Thank you, Ms Taylor. As I outlined previously, this year's budget invests \$8.4 million over three years to implement Victoria's new GE strategy, which includes that \$5.1 million over three years to the Commission for Gender Equality in the Public Sector to implement the Act and embed the Act too as we move forward. That is on top of that \$13.4 million invested in the 2020–21 budget to implement the Act, which was effectively the funding that went into establishing the Commission for Gender Equality in the Public Sector, and it has been doing a power of work, I have got to say, since its establishment, particularly under the leadership of Dr Niki Vincent. If you have not met her, you should. She has been a great champion for the work of the commission and has achieved an incredible amount in a short space of time since she has been brought on.

The commission supports the commissioner to implement the Act and to ensure that those defined entities are supported to meet their obligations, and those obligations commenced from 31 March last year. Since it was established, the commission has delivered workshops, roadshows and produced guidelines to support organisations to meet their obligations and to progress those outcomes. A practice leaders group of defined entities was also established and is comprised of a mix of public sector entities of varying size and practice as well at varied points in their gender equality journey too to really make sure that we are capturing that full spectrum of where organisations are up to. They are sharing learnings and informing the reform moving forward, which I think is going to be a really important learning exercise to make sure not only that we continue to embed this initiative and reform but that we do so in the best way possible to drive the best possible

outcomes. There may well be learnings from that in terms of how we can better support those defined entities to achieve better outcomes.

A *Gender Equality Act* implementation advisory committee was also established, and that provides expert advice on the development of guidance materials and implementation support to assist defined entities to meet their obligations under the Act, and tailored support is also made available to entities from a panel of providers. Those providers each have relevant gender, industry and regional expertise to help those defined entities be able to comply with the Act. They are a great resource pool in effect for our defined entities to draw on. The commission has published and circulated guidance materials and regularly provides advice to defined entities with input from consultation from governance groups, from departments of course as well, councils, universities et cetera. And a community practice group has been established by the commission to provide a forum for organisations to also be able to share the learnings and best practice in terms of progressing workplace gender equality, and we should not underestimate I think the value of that: of actually encouraging that conversation between those, particularly after this first year when everyone has gone through the first cycle of having to provide that data, which we will now build upon. I think getting those shared learnings across quite different workplaces and environments will be really valuable moving forward.

We recognise that the Act affects Victoria's largest workforce, with a broad-ranging diversity within and between those public sector bodies in size and type of organisation. We acknowledge that there is a significant variation between entities at their current level of capacity to meet obligations under the Act as well, and a key part of our focus to date has been getting a really clear sense of where different entities are at and what kind of support they will need. The commission works really closely with all of those entities to ensure that their advice and resources are tailored to where that organisation is up to at this point in time.

So as I have outlined earlier, all organisations have submitted their workplace gender audits and all organisations are on track to submit their gender equality action plans by June. I think that really is demonstrative of the public sector's commitment to gender equality and also of the commission's success in providing that implementation support, and I have no doubt that without that support we would not be enjoying such a strong response to the Act.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Deputy Chair.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Thank you again. Minister, I wonder if you can see my frustration. When I ask you about a cut to the women's policy budget you say, 'Oh, no, you've got to look at it in the whole of government; there are all these other things in the whole-of-government area that we're doing for women'. When I ask something about a whole-of-government project like gender impact assessments, you say, 'That's not my portfolio'.

**Ms WILLIAMS:** No, no, that is not quite right, Mr O'Brien. I do correct that, because I do not want to let that slide. You asked about a cut, and I explained how what might have been evident in my portfolio was effectively replaced in other parts of government. That was a different point, so I used the example of specific women's mental health funding and how that had effectively been replaced by a doubling of funding for women's health services through the health portfolio this year. That was a way of demonstrating that what you saw through COVID-specific funding was actually effectively being replaced with more in other parts of government now that we are in a recovery phase. I think that it is important to note that distinction.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Okay. But, I mean, anything that is bad seems to be someone else's portfolio, or even data that we are trying to get seems to be someone else's portfolio. When we try and ask—

**Ms WILLIAMS:** It is somebody else's portfolio, Mr O'Brien, when it is somebody else's portfolio. That is just a statement of fact.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Well, I just asked about Barwon. I asked about a gender impact assessment which has not been done for Barwon women's and children's health, for example. That is actually mentioned in your gender equality statement; it is in your document as one of the things that the government is doing. Are you talking to DTF about gender-responsive budgeting and how that is actually being rolled out?

**Ms WILLIAMS:** Of course, but as I have explained in previous parts or sessions of this hearing, Mr O'Brien, I have as a minister advocacy responsibility across government and indeed across all my portfolios—they are also advocacy portfolios—and I also have areas of policy that are directly within control of

my portfolios, and many of those areas you are welcome to question me on. Where they relate to a different minister, though, despite my advocacy role, it is still ultimately the decision and responsibility of that minister to oversee the parts that fall within their portfolio, and that is the distinction I am making with you. I am not seeking to be difficult, Mr O'Brien, I am genuinely seeking just to explain the difference between an advocacy role and where actually decision-making responsibility falls elsewhere.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Okay.

**The CHAIR:** I would point out, Mr O'Brien, that this committee's own inquiry in relation to gender-responsive budgeting did actually find that those responsibilities fit within each and every department and not exclusively with the portfolio of women.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Yes, but apparently we just cannot answer questions on them if we do not like the sound of it.

**The CHAIR:** Mr O'Brien—

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Well, that is what it is, Chair. Really that is what it comes down to.

**The CHAIR:** Mr O'Brien, we are here to put questions to the minister on what she is responsible for within her portfolio.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Well, the minister just indicated advocacy, so on the question of advocacy, there was a \$13.2 million investment last year in the budget over six months to ease pressures on the state's maternity services, but it was not continued in this budget. We have got Portland maternity hospital closed; we have got issues with critical shortages of midwives and the like. What advocacy have you done to the Minister for Health to improve women's health outcomes when it comes to maternity and child health services?

**Ms WILLIAMS:** Mr O'Brien, I think you are being somewhat obtuse given the discussion that we have just had. I mean, you are referring to maternity services, which quite clearly fall within the decision-making power of the Minister for Health—

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** And I asked what advocacy you have done. You just told me you do advocacy throughout the government. That is exactly the question.

**Ms WILLIAMS:** I can assure you, Mr O'Brien, I advocate on a range of issues and have done over many, many years, whether that be systemic inequalities which mean that women and girls more generally experience poorer health outcomes, and you will see me advocating across many different areas from education to health to mental health to justice, but ultimately the decisions within those portfolios and the ability of those ministers to explain those decisions is with those other portfolios, not with me. You know, I think your questions are incredibly reasonable, they are just directed at the wrong minister. I am not well placed to be able to answer detailed questions about areas where decisions have been made by other ministers. So you are free to ask what I advocate on, and I will proudly attest to the fact that I advocate on a great number of issues and will continue to, but ultimately the questions you are asking are going to government spending and government decision-making and they must be answered by the relevant minister with portfolio responsibility for those areas.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Well, can I go back to the gender impact assessments and gender-responsive budgeting. What is your portfolio doing to roll this out across the government?

**Ms WILLIAMS:** My portfolio has responsibility for the creation of the commission and the work of the public sector gender equality commissioner, Dr Niki Vincent, and I work very closely with them to get the structure of that reform and that office functioning to make sure that we resource that office, which is a part of our portfolio spend this budget. As I have spoken to on questions from Mr Barton and others, Ms Taylor as well, the detail about that investment does fall within my portfolio, which goes to supporting the work of the commission.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Minister. Ms Taylor.

**Ms TAYLOR:** We were just talking about gender impact assessments, but I would actually like to go on to the public sector gender equality commissioner. I am interested to hear more about the role of the public sector

gender equality commissioner in ensuring successful implementation of the Act. Keeping with budget paper 3, page 39, can you please outline the functions of the commissioner—I know you did refer to it briefly, but more information would be good—and what a role like this means to the broader Victorian community?

**Ms WILLIAMS:** Sure. Thank you, Ms Taylor. This is a nice segue for the point I was just making to Mr O'Brien, which was around the work of the public sector gender equality commissioner, who oversees the implementation of the *Gender Equality Act*, and as we previously discussed, also supports those defined entities in meeting their obligations under the Act. Dr Niki Vincent was appointed as Victoria's first public sector gender equality commissioner in September 2020. The Commission for Gender Equality in the Public Sector supports the commissioner to implement the Act to ensure that those defined entities are supported to meet their obligations, which commenced on 31 March last year. I use and labour that word 'supported' because this is an approach, as I have outlined before, which is about being collaborative, working with organisations, seeing where they are at and trying to assist them to lift from there, as opposed to any kind of punitive approach, and the role of the commission in supporting those organisations is really central and pivotal to the success that we achieve. Most recently we can see that obviously in the fact that all entities have provided that data and are on track to provide their GEAPs by the end of June, but we know that that support is going to be critical to, really, the bigger piece of work that continues from here on in, which is making sure that we drive improvement using as a baseline the data that we have managed to collect in recent months.

The commissioner has monitoring and enforcement functions under the Act as well as educative functions to support defined entities to comply with their obligations. If you ever get the opportunity to speak to Dr Vincent, you will know that she spends a lot of time going out and meeting with different defined entities to be able to have these conversations, to inform them what the purpose of the Act is, of the measures within it and to try and work with them. That has been incredibly fruitful, and I think we can see that in the data that I outlined earlier. The commissioner publishes the gender equality action plans and also the progress reports submitted by defined entities to allow for progress to be measured over time and also to be compared across industries and sectors as well. All action plans are due to be submitted with the commissioner by June this year.

The commissioner also has the power to deal with disputes relating to systemic gender inequality issues arising under an enterprise agreement or workplace determination of a designated body. In resolving disputes the commissioner may make a recommendation or conduct conciliation or mediation, which is definitely the preference. The independence of the public sector gender equality commissioner is really central to this reform. It adds transparency and accountability on the rate of change and also on the levels of progress made by the public sector. It means that government is not effectively policing itself and ensures that the government of the day cannot internalise that scrutiny—that it is being conducted in a way that is robust and outside of politics, effectively. Transparency, I think, will help us move forward, and we will require these organisations to publish what they have or have not achieved. The first of these gender equality action plans are due to be published this year, as I have outlined. Public reporting of outcomes will soon be able to tell all Victorians and importantly also jobseekers who are the best performers across the public sector in terms of gender equality. We know, particularly for many women entering the workforce, that that is actually increasingly a really serious consideration that they will make when choosing where they go to work and what jobs they might like to pursue. Future generations will want to work for organisations that embrace gender equality and fair play. That is not just women; it is men as well for the reasons that I outlined earlier when answering a question from Mr Barton around equality taking many forms, and that also means men being able to avail themselves of opportunities in the workplace that enable them to spend more time at home with their families and in turn perhaps free up partners to take on a greater share of paid work if that is what they want to do. So this really is about creating opportunities that everybody in the Victorian community may want to—or that may influence the decisions of people in our community in terms of where they work and what they are doing for work and what entities they might like to be employed by.

**Ms TAYLOR:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Minister. Mr Hibbins.

**Mr HIBBINS:** Thank you, Chair. Minister, you referred to the *Gender Equality Act* and how it relates to local governments, particularly in terms of equality for their workforce. Do you accept that the government, through its cap on local government rates, is actually having a negative effect on particularly women in the

local government workforce through less jobs for women, less secure work, worse conditions, because that is actually counterproductive?

**Ms WILLIAMS:** Look, I would not accept the premise of that question, Mr Hibbins, and ultimately the question is going to rate capping. It is outside of my portfolio area, as you know. I can talk to the value of the commission and the work that it is doing with councils and the fact that that gender audit data has been provided now by 100 per cent of entities, including councils, and that we are seeing an incredible commitment by local government to actually meet their obligations under the Act and in many cases go beyond it. In fact from my experience local government and many individual local councils have been some of the greatest champions of this reform. In fact I was just last week out in Warrnambool and had somebody who worked for local government out in that direction comment to me on the impact of the *Gender Equality Act* on her workplace in a very, very short space of time and of the increased voice that women have within that workplace on the back of that Act because it required those changes. So I am happy to speak to that aspect of it. In terms of your question around rate capping, though, that is best directed to the relevant minister, which would be the Minister for Local Government.

**Mr HIBBINS:** Okay. The budget refers to gender-responsive budgeting. Do you anticipate that there will be, in the future, analysis of policies like that on their impact on women?

**Ms WILLIAMS:** Yes. In terms of gender-responsive budgeting as it has been implemented—and we are only in the first year of that—we of course are evaluating that budget on budget. We know that it is in its infancy. We have seen from the outcomes in this budget a notable improvement—I think as I outlined in my opening remarks, some \$940 million invested across government that directly goes to improving outcomes for women. We can compare that to previous budgets and know that that is an improved outcome. But as that becomes more embedded in our systems and structures and we are able to, I suppose, improve the sophistication of the model, I think we will continue to see those benefits, and we are going to continue to analyse it. But it is also worth noting in this budget that we have contributed another—I believe it is—\$1.1 million to enshrining gender-responsive budgeting into legislation to further embed that, and that in itself will allow us to be able to measure progress to a greater extent and to ensure that it is having the desired effect. Ultimately what we want to be able to do is evaluate the outcomes that we are achieving through it and of course tweak where improvements need to be made if they do.

**Mr HIBBINS:** Do you anticipate it will also look at policies—for example, the public sector wages cap, which is now sitting at 1.5 per cent, less than New South Wales, obviously affecting a lot of frontline workers? Do you anticipate doing some analysis on the impact on women of policies like that?

**Ms WILLIAMS:** I think gender-responsive budgeting opens up the ability for us to evaluate all of our policies and programs and the gendered nature of those impacts. That is the strength of the model. It really is in many respects a brave position to be taking forward, because often what we are looking at in terms of the decisions across government are policies and programs that on their face may appear to be effectively gender neutral, and in my view there is no such thing as gender neutrality. All of our policies and programs are obviously open to examination under gender-responsive budgeting, and of course under the *Gender Equality Act* our public sector entities are also subject to another level of scrutiny and analysis too about not only the way their workforces are structured and operate but how their policies and programs are run as well.

**Mr HIBBINS:** Okay. Thank you, Minister. Thanks, Chair.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Mr Hibbins. Thank you, Minister. That concludes the time we have set aside for consideration of the women's portfolio 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.

As this is the last public hearing for this year's estimates hearings, we thank all ministers and officers who have given evidence to the committee 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.

I declare this hearing adjourned.

**Committee adjourned.**