

TRANSCRIPT

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the Victorian Government's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

Melbourne—Thursday, 27 August 2020

(via videoconference)

MEMBERS

Ms Lizzie Blandthorn—Chair

Mr Richard Riordan—Deputy Chair

Mr Sam Hibbins

Mr David Limbrick

Mr Gary Maas

Mr Danny O'Brien

Ms Pauline Richards

Mr Tim Richardson

Ms Ingrid Stitt

Ms Bridget Vallence

WITNESSES

Ms Katherine Ellis, Chief Executive Officer, and

Mr Thomas Feng, Media and Communications Manager, Youth Affairs Council Victoria.

The CHAIR: Welcome to YACVic to the second series of public hearings for the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee Inquiry into the Victoria's Government's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic. The committee will be reviewing and reporting to the Parliament on the responses taken by the Victorian government, including as part of the national cabinet, to manage the COVID-19 pandemic and any other matter related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Members are attending these hearings remotely from home and from their electorate offices, so we ask that people note that members are not required to wear a face covering if they are working by themselves in an office under the stay-at-home directions, 6 August, part 2, section 7(i).

We advise you that all evidence taken by this committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. Therefore you are protected against any action for what you say here today, but if you repeat the same things outside this forum, including on social media, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript for you to check. Verified transcripts, presentations and handouts will be placed on the committee's website as soon as possible.

We invite you to make a very brief opening statement of 5 minutes. We ask that you state your name, position and the organisation you represent for broadcasting purposes, and this will be followed by questions from the committee. So welcome to YACVic. Thank you.

Ms ELLIS: Thank you, Chair and committee. We appreciate the opportunity to speak with you today. I would like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land I am speaking to you from, Wurundjeri country, and pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging. I would also like to acknowledge the many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people who are separated from community and country at the moment due to COVID-19 restrictions. I know this is a very tough time for them.

My name is Katherine Ellis, and I am the CEO of Youth Affairs Council Victoria, or YACVic. YACVic is the peak body for young people in Victoria and the youth sector that works with and supports them. I want to start by being very clear that this COVID-19 pandemic represents a major crisis that will fundamentally change the lives of all young people in Victoria. They have been abruptly and disproportionately slammed by this unprecedented health and economic situation, and it will define the generation and potentially have devastating long-term impacts on their lives.

The pandemic has actually highlighted and exacerbated many of the challenges that young people were already facing, and in addition there are young people who now need supports who never had previously contemplated it. The fast pace of the change has also made it extremely challenging for the government and services to keep up with the impacts and put solutions in place. Already marginalised young people have been very hard hit. In particular there is an increased risk from family violence and abuse, of homelessness and disabled young people have experienced a lack of support to access education and services. Young people in rural and regional areas and those experiencing socio-economic disadvantage have struggled to access technology for school and for services, and young people from non-English-speaking backgrounds have taken on additional responsibilities at home, helping siblings with online learning and interpreting the deluge of COVID information for their family and community.

At the same time young people are making enormous sacrifices and bearing many burdens to keep the community safe, and that needs to be acknowledged. Some sacrifices are obvious and much discussed in the public sphere. For example, severely disrupted education, tens of thousands of young people losing their jobs and many being excluded from income support measures, social isolation. And, closely associated with all of those, significant increases in mental ill health.

Other burdens are less recognised. Some young people have been unable to afford rent and have had to move home to very difficult family situations. There is increased racism and discrimination and things like a loss of sport-related social connection and leadership opportunities. There are some sacrifices that may only be seen as important by the young people themselves, but they are actually a vital part of their transition to adulthood, and

they are things like missing once-in-a-lifetime rites of passage like graduations and school trips, and being forced into isolation with family at a crucial time when normally they would be expanding their friendship networks, exploring their identities and asserting their independence. On a brighter note, in times of trouble across history young people have stepped up, and we have seen that in relation to COVID-19 as well. Young people are telling us every day that they want to be part of the solutions to the COVID-19 disaster, and they deserve seats at the table.

The silver lining of the crisis has been an increase in collaboration across the sector and beyond as we all work to a common purpose. YACVic and others in the sector have put significant efforts into bringing together leaders, workers and young people to share information, to support each other and to learn new skills as we adjust to the new normal. It is gratifying that the government has already recognised some critical needs of young people in this crisis. The most significant example is the significant large investment in additional mental health supports, which were discussed at length in the last session with Orygen. A coalition of youth-focused organisations led by YACVic has also received funding from the Working for Victoria Fund for additional youth outreach capacity and to strengthen the youth sector, which is very welcome. We genuinely hope that there will be more investment in the capacity of youth sector organisations to deal with the growing demand for services.

I will also note that youth organisations and other community organisations which work with young people play a very important role in youth wellbeing, including mental health. They do vital work in prevention and early intervention and identifying young people who need a referral to clinical services or other services, especially where young people have trusted relationships with those organisations. We have been very pleased to see the government move quickly to create new jobs in the public service specifically for young people. It would be very positive if the private sector was also willing to step up to create entry-level opportunities for young people.

The Working for Victoria model also offers potential to create jobs to deliver public good and employ teams of young people, providing jobs, purpose, skills development and social connection. This crisis is still unfolding, so it will be important to monitor the various supports that have been provided and be ready to do more as and when it is necessary, and also to consult more with the communities and the cohorts that are being impacted to really understand from their lived experience where there are gaps and if new concerns are emerging. We also need to start looking to the future to a youth-focused recovery. Part of helping young people cope with the current emergency is giving them assurance that thought, care and resources are already being put into a recovery strategy. They are looking down the barrel of a sustained period of major unemployment and underemployment, so hearing now that the government is making plans to address that will help reduce their anxiety and stimulate motivation and trust.

A youth-focused recovery will need to include essential short-term measures, and it also provides a chance to address pre-existing systemic issues that affect the lives of young people. It should also have a strong element of youth participation so young people are meaningfully involved in the decisions that affect their lives. Decent work and secure housing are foundational needs and are also critical to young people's mental health and wellbeing. A COVID-19 recovery must prioritise creation of meaningful jobs for young people, giving them a foot on the ladder at a crucial time as well as purpose and community connection. For those who cannot find a job, permanently raising the rate of income support to a decent level will allow young people to live, develop, volunteer and search for work with dignity and wellbeing.

Clearly a youth-focused recovery will also require investment in a strong youth sector to support these young people through the short- and long-term impacts of COVID-19. YACVic has recently worked with the youth sector and other experts, including young people themselves, to develop a set of priority recommendations for a youth-focused recovery. Governments, business, unions, philanthropy and community organisations will all need to work collectively to make serious and long-lasting investments in a youth-focused recovery—in young people as agents for change as well as emerging citizens with unique needs and perspectives in need of support and development. We need a youth-focused recovery from this crisis for all our futures. I would now like to pass to my colleague, Thomas Feng, to talk more about COVID-19 impacts from the perspective of young people.

Mr FENG: Good afternoon, committee and Chair, and thank you for this opportunity. I am Thomas Feng, and I would like to acknowledge that I am currently on Wurundjeri land of the Kulin nation, that sovereignty

was never ceded and this always was and always will be Aboriginal land. I am a first-generation Chinese Australian who grew up in the south-eastern suburbs of Melbourne in Noble Park and Mount Waverley, and I am a young person who, through my work as YACVic's Media and Communications Manager, has spoken with an extensive number of young people trying to cope with COVID-19. I am here today to represent their stories and their voices, which have not been heard throughout this time, and to also share my experiences of translating the various policy changes and restrictions so that they resonate with young people.

Young people are told going through school and growing up today that we can become whoever we want to be when we grow up, but I think COVID-19 has uncovered the difficult challenges that already lay ahead for young people. This is a generation-defining pandemic, and young people will be disproportionately impacted long term. COVID-19 has had so many unforeseen impacts, as Katherine has outlined, and young people have made enormous sacrifices across our entire lives. We have been blamed and chastised for breaking rules, but there is no doubt that young people take this virus very seriously and understand the importance of following the rules and getting through these really hard times. We are living through the hardships and the challenges, and we are seeing our lives disrupted every day.

What we need as young people is other young people championing how to cope and support each other throughout the restrictions and to understand how to navigate the deluge of information coming through. Rather than relying on traditional forms of media, young people want to see easy-to-understand information via the channels that we use. What young people want is to be empowered to take action and to be consulted on the solution. We want recognition for the good stories that we are bringing in these difficult times, and those stories include people like Alex Decker, who is feeding 50 000 frontline workers each and every week through Alex Makes Meals, and the Letters against Iso initiative started by the Mac.Robertson high school captain.

As young people we want to be optimistic and hopeful, and we do not just want to go back to how things were before. We want to build a better future for everyone. Young people want a youth-focused recovery that also addresses issues which have been exacerbated by COVID-19. We need a youth employment plan with dedicated job creation for young people. We need young people at the decision-making table on the issues that affect us. And we need a strong youth sector to ensure that every young person can be supported to become whoever we want to be when we grow up. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. I will pass to Ms Ingrid Stitt, MLC, to start the questions.

Ms STITT: Thank you, Chair, and thank you to both of you for that presentation. It was great. I wanted to ask first of all, and you touched in your presentation on quite a few of the issues that are facing young people currently: how many of those issues are new or is it the case that they were existing issues and the pandemic is exacerbating the impact of them?

Ms ELLIS: A lot of them existed already. What has happened is, as you say, the pandemic has exacerbated them for some young people, or it has taken away some young people's ability to use the coping mechanisms that they had before. So for example, young people who were in out-of-home environments or in family violence situations where typically before they would have escaped to a friend's house to spend the night if things got too bad, they cannot do that now. Also, you know, LGBTIQ+ young people who have moved away from their families if they were not affirming in some cases have had to move home again. So it is the coping mechanisms as well as the fact that the issues are exacerbated.

On top of that, there are young people who did not have issues before who now do. So there is an extra cohort of young people who are seeking services and needing support. And you can see that, you know, in the unemployment numbers. Young people have been so slammed by unemployment. It is up at nearly 16 per cent at the moment, compared with 7.1 per cent in the general population, and if you actually include underemployment, it is nearly 36 per cent. That is more than a third of young people who are not fully utilised in the workforce and not working as much as they would like to be and are therefore struggling financially along with that. There is going to be another nearly 20 000 school leavers in a few months as well who will all need entry-level jobs and pathways to employment. That is part of why we are really stressing as part of a youth-focused recovery that there needs to be a youth employment plan and a really strong focus on proactively supporting young people's engagement in the labour market. And that is not just government; industry also needs to play a role in that, because job creation is going to be the strongest lever for young people to come out of this situation.

And then around that you need all those wraparound supports, because a lot of young people will not be able to just sort of jump into a job and succeed. That has always been the case, but there will probably be more young people who—and let us face it, if we are having young people go into education or into jobs and they find that opportunity and get it, the last thing you want is for them to fall away from that. So having those wraparound supports is incredibly important as well. Thomas, did you want to add anything to that?

Mr FENG: Yes. I would like to tell you one story, of Sean, who is a young person. He is 14 years old. He lives a bit out of Swan Hill, which is a big town out in the north-west, and prior to COVID he only had mobile phone access and internet access in the mornings. There was no signal or internet access throughout the rest of the day. So obviously going to remote schooling has been really, really hard for him, because after the class in the morning he has no access. He cannot download the videos to access the classes, and that is an issue that already started before COVID—the lack of internet access. I think it has really shown that in a youth-focused recovery we really need proper access to the supports and services that young people need to go into education, for work—and I think that has really been exacerbated by COVID-19.

Ms STITT: Just on that issue of accessing youth services—and you did touch on a few potentially more marginalised groups of young people who have probably been quite impacted by the COVID pandemic—how have youth organisations adapted to that, and how have they tried to connect with young people during the pandemic?

Ms ELLIS: It has been a really interesting time. We did a survey early in May, early on in the crisis, and even at that time we found 89 per cent of services were saying they had experienced an increase in demand, and at the same time about a quarter of them had stood down employees or reduced hours. So what is having to happen is that services are needing to be creative just in terms of being able to handle capacity, for a start. On top of that, obviously a lot of them cannot do face-to-face services or their ability to do face-to-face services or run group activities is severely limited now, and so there has been a massive shift online. And YACVic has actually done a lot of work, as have others in the sector, to help organisations look at how to do group work and youth services and actually do protection visits and things like that using technology. Some of that has been a very positive thing, but some of it has been less positive, and we are worried that the issues are only going to increase for young people for at least a period of time and there will not be the capacity to support that. And we are hearing that local government youth services are having budget cuts and staff redeployed, so we really want to make sure that youth services at the local government level and also in the community are continuing to receive the funding that they received before and ideally actually have that supplemented to help them deal with this surge of impact.

Ms STITT: Has it been even harder for young people living in sort of geographically more isolated parts of Victoria or even outer suburban areas to connect in? What is the feedback you have been getting from people on that?

Ms ELLIS: Yes, it is definitely an issue, and it is young people with disability as well. What it comes down to in a lot of cases is access to technology—and Thomas talked a moment ago about that young person who does not always have access. So technology is a huge thing, and I think one of the really very, very solid approaches that the government could take going forward is to put in place whatever needs to be put in place to make sure that young people right across the state have really strong internet access and the amount of data they need and that kind of thing as well.

In some cases it has actually made services more accessible for those young people in rural and regional areas, because they can access things through technology that were only ever delivered face to face in metro or regional hubs before. So that has been a positive sign along with telehealth and things like that. And for some young people it suits them to do online work if they suffer anxiety or they have been bullied or things like that, so in some ways it has been positive. But the reality is that it has been very tough for young people in rural and regional areas, particularly when they are extra-isolated because they are not going to school and maybe families are at work and they are home by themselves—that kind of thing—and I think in that sort of situation actually mentoring can make a big difference. What we are seeing is that organisations that have been running mentoring programs—and we do one in partnership with the Koorie Youth Council and five Aboriginal communities, for Aboriginal young people. What we are hearing is that those young people have stayed connected with their mentors through this process even though the communities have been constrained. And

Whitelion is another example. They are using youth outreach workers to support sort of mentoring environments as well.

Mr FENG: To add to what Katherine said as well, I think one of the unique things that has happened is, yes, there has been heaps of creativity and moving programs online, but a lot of the families and people do not have the necessary devices. They do not have enough devices to spread across the family to go to work, to go to school, or they are having to choose which child goes to school that day, which is a unique sort of issue. And I think also it is really important to note that because we are using all these new online tools, making sure that these tools recognise and are across sort of child safety and privacy protocols and making sure that young people's data is actually safe is another big issue that is coming up for youth services. That is why it is really important that we make sure that we invest in these tools and technologies.

Ms STITT: Yes, equal access to technology is coming through as a very strong theme from your evidence. I am interested in what other things young people are telling you they need from the government in terms of support during the pandemic

Ms ELLIS: I think one overarching thing that we are hearing constantly is being listened to, being heard, being included in the conversation and being at the decision-making table. So I think that that is something that can be facilitated fairly easily and needs to be included as we are moving into decisions and solutions for a recovery process. There are things like schools struggling with students who are disengaging or need extra supports—so actually having those wraparound supports provided quite often by community organisations. We are hearing that schools are approaching local community organisations asking for extra support—so actually putting that support into the schools to help young people catch up and to help them re-engage and actually in schools providing opportunities for engagement that are just purely focused on the social connection that young people get at school. Young people are telling us that that is an incredibly important part of school that they did not even realise that they had and now they are missing very much. And I actually think that that will be part of a strategy of re-engaging young people—to bring them back through that social connection in the schools. Thomas, do you want to add to what young people are saying?

Mr FENG: Another important point that I have been constantly hearing is about employment. Young people were juggling two or three casual jobs to pay the bills and get by, and a lot of that work has dried up. So I think that really highlights the insecurity of work and the fact that we really need, in a youth-focused recovery, a youth employment plan that creates dedicated jobs for young people, that supports pathways into secure, meaningful work for young people for things that they have studied for and that gives them hope about where they can go moving forward.

Ms STITT: I think I have probably got a little bit of time left, but I just wanted to quickly ask you about whether your service has experienced an increase or a reduction in demand and whether the government has been able to support the organisation during the pandemic.

Ms ELLIS: So we have experienced a significant increase in demand. As the peak body we see it as our role to not just run our own activities but to support the other organisations in the running of theirs, and as everybody has been dealing with all the troubles it has been hard. So we have been very fortunate to receive some funding from the equality and youth branch in DPC to ramp up our capacity to run extra events and to do information sharing and peer support. But also we have received a grant from the Working for Victoria Fund that will bring extra capacity into our team, which will be huge, and seven other organisations in the coalition—some of which are youth outreach workers, some of which are policy and communications—will play that role in really helping get information to young people in a more effective way.

But a couple of those roles are also about identifying the innovation that has been happening and collecting that and disseminating it out so everybody has those ideas and importantly a role—two roles actually which are focused on the workforce, because one of the things we are worried about is there are a lot of people studying youth work right now in universities and TAFEs who need to do placements to complete their qualifications, and they are going to be so needed in the sector. We need them to graduate. And so what these two roles will do is help facilitate placements in the sector or projects in lieu of placements so that those people can finish their qualifications and then enter the sector.

Ms STITT: Great initiative. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. The member's time has just expired so I will hand the call to Ms Bridget Vallence, MP.

Ms VALLENCE: Thank you, Chair, and thank you very much, Ms Ellis and Mr Feng, for your presentation and appearing before this inquiry. It is much appreciated. First I would just like to ask: earlier this week the Premier and the government announced they are seeking to extend the state of emergency to 12 months. You have talked in your presentation and earlier answers around work has dried up and a lot of young people and the typical types of work that they will do, whether that be in retail or in hospitality, it is challenging for them that that work is not there, and also the prospect of that delaying the return to school. What do you think about the impact that might have in terms of resumption of school and normal social connection and job prospects for young people?

Ms ELLIS: My understanding is that the changes to legislation that are being discussed are to give the ability to extend the state of emergency, not actually to extend it. So I think that hopefully with the numbers coming down we will not need to extend the stage 4 and stage 3 restrictions that are in place right now and we can start to carefully open up the economy and open up schools and things, and I think it will be very welcome, particularly for year 12 students doing VCE and VCAL, a lot of whom need to actually do practical placements and things to complete their study as well as to be going back into schools. But I think everybody also understands that we have to make some sacrifices now in order to be okay for the long term. The alternative is that we just keep going up and down and up and down and, you know, when I am talking with young people and in the youth sector and people in the community sector, everybody is very supportive of doing what needs to be done in the hope that it will be sooner rather than later that we can start to be freed up.

Ms VALLENCE: Yes, sure, prioritising health and addressing the health risk is definitely a key, but what are you hearing from young people in terms of the job prospects? You know, we are coming into spring and summer and a lot of casual work opportunities usually in those times at festivals, in tourism, in hospitality. What would you suggest in terms of those employment opportunities that would normally be there that probably will not be? What can the government do to assist in that regard?

Ms ELLIS: I will go back to what I said in my opening statement with this one because I think you are right. I think there are really creative ways that business, that government can really think about what jobs could be created for young people that are alternatives to the ones that they cannot access at the moment or that have disappeared completely to get them through this period, get them through this transition of study to work, make sure they have experience so that when the economy does pick up again they have not sort of fallen through a gap as a lost generation, because they are the ones that will be scarred for the long term. That is where I think initiatives like the government has put in place to create entry-level jobs across the state government—I think it would be fantastic if local government also created those kinds of jobs, because a lot of them can be done from home and so young people will get that experience, they will get an income and they will be able to sustain in that way.

Ms VALLENCE: Is it a prospect that those jobs just will not be there?

Ms ELLIS: Sorry, which jobs are you talking about?

Ms VALLENCE: Just the normal sorts of jobs that young people typically would take up. Are you concerned at all or are you hearing concerns from young people about jobs not being available for the foreseeable future, the types of jobs that they would normally do in the break during university and so forth?

Ms ELLIS: Yes, of course. I mean, young people are all concerned about their job prospects, and that includes not just holiday jobs, but there are a lot of young people who actually support themselves while they are studying. We consider young people up to 25, so they are young adults who are supporting themselves and living their lives. There is real concern about the fact that so many of those jobs have disappeared either for the short term or the long term, and that is where income support becomes incredibly important. So there is a lot of concern also as to whether the federal government will continue to provide JobKeeper and the coronavirus supplement to JobSeeker and youth allowance, because that has actually made an enormous difference to young people over the last four or five months—they were trying to live on \$40 a day or less before and now they are actually really able to live with some dignity and not be kind of missing meals and things because they do not have enough money.

Mr FENG: If I could just jump in there, Katherine, as well, sorry, I think really it is pointing to the fact that we need dedicated job creation for young people. We need a youth employment plan that seeks to actively address the increase in youth unemployment. Youth unemployment was already higher. It has never recovered from the GFC. So young people's prospects were already at risk prior to COVID, and COVID-19 has just really exacerbated young people's prospects. Young people are going to be fighting with older people who have been let go from their jobs, so it is going to be a really tough time for young people. That needs to be recognised, and that is why we need a youth employment plan that is supporting young people in a really supportive and targeted way.

Ms VALLENCE: Thank you. We have heard a lot during this inquiry that the lockdown restrictions have resulted in social isolation. I know certainly members in my community have told me that isolation has probably been the biggest impact for them of this pandemic. What are you hearing from young people regarding the impact of isolation on physical and mental health?

Ms ELLIS: It is definitely affecting them the way it is affecting everybody. As I mentioned in my opening statement, a lot of young people live a very different kind of lifestyle to older people. So they do not necessarily live with their partner. They are quite often in home-share situations where there are multiple people, and in some ways that can provide company, but it also makes it more difficult when there is no prospect to get away from that either. I think that the isolation aspect needs to also be considered in the context of young people not being able to expand their networks of friends and explore new identities and go out there to parties and the kind of thing that older people—

Ms VALLENCE: What we were lucky enough to enjoy when we were young.

Ms ELLIS: Exactly.

Ms VALLENCE: Has your organisation had any information regarding a very difficult topic, suicide, increase in suicide or suicide attempts or self-harm amongst young people? Are you hearing there is an increase?

Ms ELLIS: I think Pat McGorry covered that in the earlier session, and he is much more qualified than I am to do that. But there is definitely a surge in mental health concerns, and that is linked to multiple things. It is linked to social isolation. It is linked to the extra burdens of trying to study online, concern about job losses, that kind of thing. And I think actually what will help with that in some ways is for there to be a lot of overt discussion about how the state is going to come back from this and what is going to be done for young people not just right now but in the coming months and coming years so that young people have more hope for the future, they have more sort of assurance that while it is not good now there is hope and there is scope for them to recover their lives, and on top of that—

Mr FENG: If I could jump in there too, Katherine—

Ms ELLIS: Sorry, Thomas. I will just finish by saying that part of that mental health support—clinical mental health is incredibly important. Pat McGorry has talked about that, and I am not going to touch on that. That is incredibly important. But there is also a real role that schools and community organisations, youth workers play in supporting young people who are struggling with whatever is going on in their life, and sometimes they can do work that means that those young people do not actually get to the point where they need real clinical mental health support. But if they do, those institutions and those people, those workers can also play a role in referring them to the right services in a way that they feel supported and they can trust those services, and that is incredibly important. And so part of what we would like to see in terms of strengthening the youth sector is a recognition of that, an investment in those kinds of services as well. Thomas?

Ms VALLENCE: And what—

The CHAIR: Sorry to interrupt you there, Ms Vallence, but your time has expired, and I will pass the call to Mr Sam Hibbins, MP.

Mr HIBBINS: Thank you, Chair, and thank you both for appearing before the committee this afternoon. You have raised this in your comments and your answers questions so far, but I am interested to ask about youth unemployment. We know young people are being significantly impacted by the economic crisis. I was

interested in hearing—does the government not already have a specific youth plan to address youth employment?

Ms ELLIS: No, not at the moment. There is work underway to develop a new youth strategy, and that will include obviously a big focus on employment. And so we are encouraged that there is strong thinking around what young people need in a holistic sense, in a whole-of-government sense. And we are very optimistic that that will have a big focus on youth employment. And with the advent of COVID it cannot not, to be honest.

Mr FENG: I think it has also been recognised that, you know, youth employment is important, because there have been announcements through the Working for Victoria Fund to fund youth-specific jobs in the public service, as well as the funding that we receive through the Working for Victoria Fund.

Mr HIBBINS: So what elements would you like to see in a youth employment plan?

Ms ELLIS: Now there is the \$64 million question. So we would like to actually see a youth employment commissioner whose role it is to look holistically at what is going on for young people in terms of employment and where jobs can be created. I think there is a lot of discussion around skills for young people, but to be honest the supply side is not the issue right now. There are a lot of skilled young people and there are not a lot of jobs, so the focus needs to be on job creation. And having that whole-of-government approach will do that, particularly if it is developed in a way where industry and unions and all of the sort of other parts of the employment space are included in it and they all feel they have a role to play in helping young people access meaningful and secure work.

Mr HIBBINS: How do you think the government can better work with and communicate to young people as part of the recovery?

Mr FENG: I can speak to that one, Katherine.

Ms ELLIS: Yes, Thomas, I was just about to hand to you to talk about the comms around COVID for a start.

Mr FENG: I think, as I alluded to in my opening statement, what we really need is—rather than relying on traditional forms of media—to meet young people where they are at, using the channels where they are at. Young people love the *Kath and Kim* cameos. They are loving the new skits coming out with Waleed Aly and Nazeem. They want to share those good stories. And I think it took a bit of time for the government to get to this point now, but I think it is really about making sure that the information that is going out when it goes out is easy to understand and does outline some of the impacts on young people. With pretty much every announcement that we would receive, I would get emails about: ‘Can I still drive? Can I still do a learning drivers lesson?’. Like, those were the sorts of things that were being left out at the start, but we are now seeing the government fill those gaps.

And I think it is also about supporting young people to find healthier ways to cope with stress and some of the conflicting messages that we are receiving. There is no shortage of coverage on the new restrictions. I think everybody gets it; we do not need any more explanations. It is actually about how you support. Why are those restrictions in place? It is going to be a tough six weeks; how can we actually help each other to get through that?

And I think it is also about covering some of the really good stories that have come out of COVID-19 about young people, stories like Jaymie, who has been fundraising for youth projects by knitting scarves with a team of five knitters to make sure that young people experiencing homelessness have a roof over their head, and stories like Alex Dekker, who started out making lasagne for his sister working on the front line and now is making, with a whole team of volunteers, 50 000 meals every week. So I think those kinds of stories that show how young people can be involved, can be active, would really support young people to understand what is going on and also help them along the journey and to not feel so disenfranchised from government as well.

Ms ELLIS: I will just add also, in terms of bringing young people’s voices to the recovery process, obviously YACVic is the peak body. We have members who are individual young people but also many organisations that work with different cohorts of young people. And so part of our role at any time is to coordinate bringing those young people to the table, creating working groups so that they can play a role in

developing strategies and implementing programs and overseeing them and evaluating them. And we are really keen to help play that role in this recovery process as well.

I will just jump back to the employment question as well. Just a couple of other things—some other examples of the recommendations that we have come up with are things like a commitment to a youth job guarantee with industry and government and community so that all young people have access to meaningful and secure work, creating an incentive program for business and community organisations to directly employ young people and provide opportunities in local areas, and actually providing some localised pro-youth economic stimulus in regions and industries that have been particularly impacted by the pandemic. So that is obviously arts, tourism, hospitality et cetera. One thing which very, very seldom gets discussed in this country—I used to work internationally with young people and there was always a big focus on youth entrepreneurship and young people actually taking the lead to create jobs for themselves by starting up businesses. I think we have a lot of young people who in this particular economic environment will be interested in leveraging their entrepreneurial skills and actually building their own businesses, so a scheme that will support that kind of thing, and particularly in rural and regional areas, will be very, very valuable.

Mr FENG: Just to add on to that briefly, sorry, I think any policies or decisions that are being made about young people have to involve young people. I think that is another way that government can really improve the engagement and communication with young people, because if we are not including young people in the decisions, how do we know that the decisions being made are correct? And young people are the experts. We are experiencing the hardships and challenges. We have unique insights and solutions to overcoming them.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. On that note, we are out of time unfortunately. Thank you very much for appearing before the committee today. The committee will follow up on any questions which were taken on notice in writing, and responses will be required within five working days of the committee's requests. This is our final witness for consideration today and indeed for this series, so we thank all of the witnesses who have given evidence to our committee over the past three weeks—two weeks of hearings. But thank you very much to those of you before us now. We also thank Hansard and our committee secretariat for the work that they have done to support this important role of the committee. On that note, I will declare this hearing adjourned. Thank you for your time.

Mr FENG: Thank you. Well done, everyone.

Ms ELLIS: Thank you. It has been a pleasure.

Committee adjourned.