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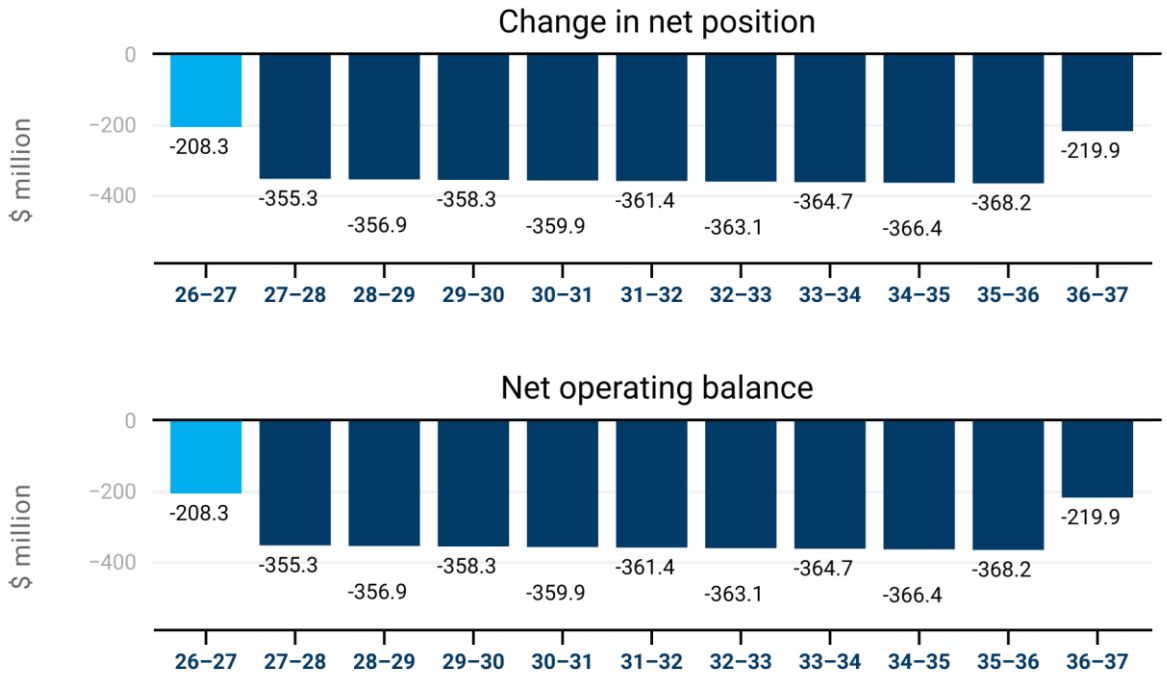
Election policy costing

Make dental free (20 clinics + $3b for public dental and prevention)

Political party	Australian Greens Victoria
Requestor	Ms Ellen Sandell MP
Request date	12 November 2026
Response date	22 November 2026
Policy commencement	1 January 2027
Policy conclusion	Ongoing
Policy summary	This policy would fund 80 additional dental chairs across 20 community clinics to deliver free dental care (excluding cosmetic and orthodontic), 7 days a week, available to all Victorians. This policy would also provide an initial investment of $3 billion over 10 years to build up existing public dental services and prevention by: ▪ providing public dental facilities and staff at all community health centres in Victoria ▪ growing the public dental workforce by increasing wages ▪ developing a comprehensive workforce strategy that considers training, graduate placements, incentives for private dental practitioners to work in public dental in rural areas, and expands the range of skills dental workers can practice in public dental ▪ increasing funding for oral health practitioners in Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations ▪ removing out-of-pocket expenses for public dental ▪ opening more free clinics ▪ providing an education campaign on sugar and brushing ▪ scaling up of the existing pre-school education program ▪ providing resources for pharmacists, aged care staff and others to refer people to dental care ▪ enabling more towns to access fluoridated water ▪ supporting alternatives for areas without fluoridated water, and ▪ providing more fluoride treatments for high-risk people.
Budget baseline	November 2026 Pre-Election Budget Update
Expiry date of this response	At the release date of the next Victorian Government budget or budget update.

Our response

Budget impact



Source: Parliamentary Budget Office.

Costing overview

We expect this policy to decrease the state's budgeted net position by:

- $1,278.8 million across 2026–27 to 2029–30
- $3,682.4 million across 2026–27 to 2036–37.

This is entirely due to an increase in operating expenses due to funding community health clinics for 80 additional dental chairs across 20 community clinics, 40 additional treatment rooms, and the specified $3 billion funding to build up public dental services and prevention.

This cost estimate is sensitive to:

- the type and extent of free dental services provided
- the capacity for additional treatment rooms, chairs and staff to be accommodated within existing dental clinics.

We did not assess whether the $3 billion in specified funding would be sufficient to achieve the stated outcomes from this amount.

We also did not assess whether dental clinics would be able to recruit sufficient additional staff for this policy.

Context

Public dental services

Oral Health Victoria (OHV) leads Victoria's public oral health services, providing dental services through the Royal Dental Hospital Melbourne (RDHM) and purchases dental services from 45 community dental agencies across Victoria. Eligible Victorians can access free or low-cost general, emergency and denture services at community dental clinics and the RDHM. Additionally, the RDHM provides specialist care (orthodontics, oral surgery and other services) on referral. Victorians who are not eligible for free care need to make a co-payment.

Other OHV programs include:

- Smile Squad, which is the Victorian Government's free school dental program, promoting oral health and delivering dental care on school grounds thought community dental clinics – the program also refers children to specialist care where needed.
- Smiles 4 Miles, which promotes oral health care, provides oral health screenings, and makes referrals to specialists for children in early childhood services.

Public dental clinics and chairs

Victoria's 45 community dental clinics and the RDHM operate more than 600 public dental chairs. In 2025—26, public dental clinics treated more than 280,000 people. We estimate that each additional public dental chair would enable public dentists to treat around 620 people per new chair annually.

In 2017, the Queensland Government invested $4.3 million to install 10 additional dental chairs at Logan Central Community Health Centre, which were expected to support an additional 15,000 appointments per chair per year.

The number of appointments per chair varies depending on staffing levels, the type and extent of dental services provided, and whether people attend appointments as scheduled. A 2024 CommBank Dental Insights survey found that private dental clinics operated on average of 3.1 dental chairs, and provided an average of 96 appointments per week, equivalent to around 30 appointments per week per chair.

In August 2026, the Victorian Government announced a $230 million investment to establish 10 new public dental clinics across Victoria. The clinics are expected to provide free urgent and routine dental care to more than 100,000 Victorians each year when fully operational. The government will also provide an additional $12.9 million to grow and retain the dental workforce required to operate the new clinics.

Our approach

Assumptions

When costing this policy, we made several assumptions. In addition to those published in our standard assumptions protocols (available at pbo.vic.gov.au/document/standardassumptions), we made the following assumptions:

1. Additional facility space would be required to deliver the full proposed increase in public dental chairs.
2. Utilisation of additional chairs would be consistent with the average across the existing stock of public dental chairs.
3. Community clinics would attract additional workers at current wage rates.
4. Dental chair, operating and maintenance expenses and funding for treatment rooms would be provided to community health clinics providing dental services.
5. There would be no Australian Government funding for additional services provided under the policy.
6. The capped component of this policy would be provided to the Department of Health and applied evenly over the costing period, with a half year impact applied to the first year of the costing.

Method

When costing this policy, we:

- obtained information about the number of public dental chairs, expenditure on public oral health, revenue from patient fees and the number of public dental chairs in Victoria
- estimated the operating cost of a dental chair per year, accounting for additional operating hours
- applied the average cost per dental chair to the number of chairs to be funded under the policy
- escalated the operating cost based on a weighted average of forecast Melbourne consumer price index and Victorian wage price index
- estimated the cost of constructing a treatment room and multiplied this by the number of treatment rooms needed
- estimated the cost of purchasing a dental chair, multiplied the unit cost by the number of chairs funded under the policy, and estimated the installation and maintenance costs
- phased the capped funding for building up public dental services and prevention over 10 years, with a part year impact to the first year of this policy to reflect a proposed 1 January 2027 commencement date.

Data sources

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Attachment A – Detailed budget impacts

Year-on-year impacts

($ million)	2026–27	2027–28	2028–29	2029–30	2030–31	2031–32	2032–33	2033–34	2034–35	2035–36	2036–37
Revenue	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Expense	208.3	355.3	356.9	358.3	359.9	361.4	363.1	364.7	366.4	368.2	219.9
Net operating balance	-208.3	-355.3	-356.9	-358.3	-359.9	-361.4	-363.1	-364.7	-366.4	-368.2	-219.9
Assets	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Leases	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Net position	-208.3	-355.3	-356.9	-358.3	-359.9	-361.4	-363.1	-364.7	-366.4	-368.2	-219.9

Cumulative impacts

($ million)	2026–27	2027–28	2028–29	2029–30	2030–31	2031–32	2032–33	2033–34	2034–35	2035–36	2036–37
Revenue	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Expense	208.3	563.6	920.4	1,278.8	1,638.7	2,000.1	2,363.2	2,727.9	3,094.3	3,462.4	3,682.4
Net operating balance	-208.3	-563.6	-920.4	-1,278.8	-1,638.7	-2,000.1	-2,363.2	-2,727.9	-3,094.3	-3,462.4	-3,682.4
Assets	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Leases	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Net position	-208.3	-563.6	-920.4	-1,278.8	-1,638.7	-2,000.1	-2,363.2	-2,727.9	-3,094.3	-3,462.4	-3,682.4

Notes: Figures may not sum due to rounding. Consistent with Victorian Budget Paper No.3 – Service Delivery, we do not consider changes to interest, depreciation expense nor non-cash adjustments. The net operating balance measures the gap between government revenue and expenses, and is an indicator of the policy's impact on operating sustainability. A positive change indicates that this policy would improve the net operating balance of the state budget. The net position measures the gap between government revenue and expenses, and movements in financial and non-financial assets. It is an indicator of the policy's impact on the state budget, and is more appropriate for comparing policy costings. A positive change indicates that this policy would improve the net position of the state budget.

Source: Parliamentary Budget Office.