

Government Advertising video transcript



Audit objective

In this audit, we looked at whether two government advertising campaigns—Our Fair Share and Victoria's Big Build—complied with government advertising laws and were cost-effective.

Who and what we examined

We examined the six government agencies involved in these campaigns. We also examined the Department of Premier and Cabinet's (DPC) oversight role of the campaign approval process.

We looked at whether the campaigns met advertising laws, including being apolitical and in the public interest.

We also examined cost-effectiveness of these campaigns and whether agencies were accurately reporting their costs.

What we concluded

In our opinion, the Our Fair Share campaign and certain advertisements in the Victoria's Big Build campaign did not fully comply with the advertising laws, especially in regard to being apolitical.

Both campaigns included political messages promoting the Victorian Government, and the Our Fair Share campaign also criticised the Commonwealth Government.

It was not clear to us, and the agencies could not show, that the campaigns were cost-effective or that reporting of costs was correct.

Why this audit is important

The Victorian Government spends at least \$80 million a year on advertising.

Given potential political sensitivity when spending taxpayer money on a campaign, the relevant entities must comply with the advertising laws and show how the public will benefit from these campaigns.

Background

The Our Fair Share campaign was designed to raise awareness and secure more Commonwealth funding for Victorian schools, hospitals and transport.

Victoria's Big Build is an ongoing campaign to inform Victorians about travel disruptions associated with transport infrastructure projects. We looked at two phases of this campaign.

In 2017, the Victorian Parliament introduced new government advertising laws intended to stop political advertising and be clear standards for the Auditor-General to assess compliance.

Legal compliance

Our Fair Share and Victoria's Big Build both complied with the legal requirement that advertising be in the public interest.

However, in our opinion, both campaigns did not always comply with laws on being apolitical.

The Our Fair Share campaign was political because it criticised the Commonwealth Government's funding for schools, health and transport leading up to the 2019 federal election. It also promoted Victorian Government spending in these areas.

Some of Victoria's Big Build advertisements were political because they focused on promoting Victorian Government spending on transport projects, rather than the disruptions.

In our opinion, the Our Fair Share campaign also did not comply with the limits on television advertising.

Unclear legislation

The agencies interpret the advertising laws differently. They maintain they complied with their obligations. They said it was necessary to focus on the motives and intentions of the person or body that published the advertisement. The agencies said they were motivated by public interest and did not intend to influence public sentiment for or against current governments.

The conflicting interpretations show that the laws are not sufficiently clear. This needs to be remedied.

Cost-effectiveness

The agencies could not show that the campaigns were cost-effective. Agencies did not always set clear objectives and targets for measuring the campaigns' performance. They did not evaluate whether the campaigns met their objectives.

Public reporting was often incorrect, incomplete, inconsistent and hard to access.

What we recommended

We made five recommendations to DPC about:

- commissioning an independent expert review of the laws to assess whether they are sufficiently clear
- improving guidance on campaign evaluation and advertising laws, and
- strengthening oversight arrangements and reporting.

We made one recommendation to DPC and the Department of Treasury and Finance about improving guidance on reporting campaign expenditure.

We also recommended that DPC and four other audited agencies improve their processes to ensure legal compliance.

Agencies accepted six of the seven recommendations. DPC did not accept the recommendation to commission an independent expert review of the laws.

To read our full report, go to audit.vic.gov.au

We also have a dashboard where you can find out more about how much government agencies spend on specific advertising campaigns.