

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

2021–22 Budget Estimates

Melbourne—Friday, 18 June 2021

MEMBERS

Ms Lizzie Blandthorn—Chair

Mr Richard Riordan—Deputy Chair

Mr Sam Hibbins

Mr David Limbrick

Mr Gary Maas

Mr James Newbury

Mr Danny O’Brien

Ms Pauline Richards

Mr Tim Richardson

Ms Nina Taylor

WITNESSES

Mr Luke Donnellan, MP, Minister for Child Protection,

Mr Ben Rimmer, Acting Secretary,

Mr Argiri Alisandratos, Deputy Secretary, Children, Families, Communities and Disability,

Ms Janine Toomey, Senior Executive Director, Community Services Operations, and

Mr Andrew Minack, Deputy Secretary, Corporate and Delivery Services, Department of Families, Fairness and Housing.

The CHAIR: I declare open this hearing of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee.

On behalf of the Parliament, the committee is conducting this Inquiry into the 2021–22 Budget Estimates. Its aim is to scrutinise public administration and finance to improve outcomes for the Victorian community.

We note that witnesses and members may remove their masks when speaking to the committee but must replace them afterwards.

All mobile telephones and computers should now be turned to silent.

All evidence taken by this committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. Comments repeated outside this hearing may not be protected by this privilege.

Ministers 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 as soon as possible.

We welcome Minister Donnellan and officers from your department. We invite you to make a brief opening statement in relation to the child protection portfolio. It will be followed by questions from the committee. Thank you.

Visual presentation.

Mr DONNELLAN: Thank you, Chair. Supporting children and families in need, particularly as we recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, is a priority in this year's budget. The Victorian budget invests \$1.2 billion over four years in the child protection portfolio to strengthen the foundations of the child and family services system and to support and trial innovative and evidence-based approaches. These include the continuing implementation of the *Wungurilwil Gagapduir* to reduce the over-representation of Aboriginal children in care; strengthening the capacity of the children and family services system and continuing our focus on early intervention; supporting children in care and the vital work of kinship and foster carers; family group conferencing and our groundbreaking Home Stretch program; and lastly, a trial of a new interdisciplinary model called Putting Families First.

Over the last 12 months COVID-19 has increased the demand on our care services, including early intervention, foster care, kinship care and residential care services, which all work with families to make sure that children are safe. While we continue to deliver reforms to strengthen ways of working across sectors and to deliver contemporary and evidence-based practices, we need to expand to meet this demand and create a system that provides the right supports where they are needed. The Victorian budget provides \$1 billion to strengthen the capacity of the children and family services system, and that includes \$641 million to continue ongoing 487 child protection office practitioners and 2773 home-based care placements, \$146 million to recruit 246 new child protection practitioners and \$25.7 million for 34 new child protection navigators. There is also \$76.4 million for an additional 408 kinship, foster and permanent care placements. Since 2014 there has been an increase in funding for an additional 1180 child protection practitioners.

We know Aboriginal people are best placed to understand the care needs of Aboriginal children. That is why this funding also includes \$31.5 million to transfer case management of Aboriginal children to ACCOs. This program is transferring the way services are delivered to at-risk Aboriginal children and families in a culturally

safe way. Through the Aboriginal Children in Aboriginal Care program and transitioning Aboriginal children to Aboriginal community controlled organisations, more Aboriginal children are now being case-managed by Aboriginal people, keeping them connected to culture and community.

There is also \$19.8 million to undertake a three-year trial of family group conferencing for children and families to plan and make decisions for children at risk of harm, abuse or neglect. And there is also \$3.5 million to continue Child First assessments and intake services which bring together a range of experienced family service providers to deliver an integrated, skilled, targeted and localised support system for vulnerable families.

This budget also builds on our previous investment to provide increased support to Victorians who care for children and young people and who do such fantastic work. We are investing \$102 million with a focus on innovative and evidence-based approaches. This includes \$35 million to expand the Victorian government's commitment to Better Futures and Home Stretch to include young people on permanent care orders who require support beyond their 18th birthday to receive support up to the age of 21. I am very proud of this initiative, which is changing lives of young people. I have heard many stories of this program allowing people to further their studies and stay in secure housing rather than becoming homeless.

There is \$7.9 billion to continue Keeping Connected: Sibling Support and Placement, and \$6.5 million to continue the Treatment Foster Care Oregon model. \$2.2 million over four years in ongoing funding for an expansion of respite placements for kinship carers, and we also expanding the Carer KaFÉ program to permanent carers so that permanent carers can access the training they need so they can better respond to a child's immediate and long-term needs.

The next slide looks at earlier support for families, with the budget providing \$70.3 million to help us intervene early and deliver better outcomes for children and families. It includes \$37 million to fund ongoing growth in family services. This will enable the delivery of targeted family support for an additional 500 families. There is \$16.3 million over two years to embed family services in universal settings such as schools and early years services. Community service organisations and Aboriginal community controlled organisations will support over 2000 families through this new model. There is \$2.6 million to fund Koori supported playgroups on an ongoing basis, and \$13.5 million to fund a trial of Frontline Victoria to fast-track degree-qualified career changers to a career in the children and family services system, boosting the workforce.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. I will stop you there. We appreciate your presentation. I will pass the first question to the Deputy Chair.

Mr RIORDAN: Thanks, Chair. Minister, budget paper 3, page 203—the output funding which provides child protection services to ensure the safety and wellbeing of children and young people at risk of harm, abuse and neglect. On 8 June this year the ABC reported the department misled two watchdogs, the Commission for Children and Young People and the Office of the Victorian Information Commissioner, telling them that during an investigation of a data breach involving a sex offender accessing the personal details of 43 vulnerable children known to child protection it had contacted all of the affected children and the families when it simply had not. Why did the government mislead those two authorities?

Mr DONNELLAN: Thank you, Deputy Chair. Look, this was a devastating event, and the privacy breach should never have been able to happen. First and foremost, I extend my sympathies to the victim and his family. The perpetrator's system access was terminated when the breach was reported in 2018, and the information commission authorities were notified. A police investigation was launched, which resulted in the gentleman going to jail. The department accepted all recommendations from the information commissioner and has taken all necessary steps to strengthen data security. This includes making sure funded organisations offboard their staff and better monitor their system users as well as the department undertaking its own biannual system audits. The audit requires organisations to confirm that active users of CRISSP have a business need to access the system and any staff member who is no longer required to access the system has their access removed immediately and their use of the system audited. Melbourne City Mission, which was the particular organisation, has accepted and actioned all privacy commissioner recommendations. Training for system administrators is also being delivered by the department to reinforce the security and privacy obligations of the funded organisations. The privacy commissioner found that human error was what actually happened in this instance: the manager in Melbourne City Mission did not correctly offboard the staff member when he left. But

the commissioner also found there should have been secondary protections in the CRISSP system, which was rectified. This was clearly unacceptable on every level, and this information must be secure.

Mr RIORDAN: Okay. Further, though, Minister, the commissioner for children and young people has said that she was reassured more than two years ago that these problems had been rectified, that allowed access to details that should not be accessed. Who gave the commissioner the confidence that things have been corrected when they clearly had not? Was it you as minister, was it your department head or who?

Mr DONNELLAN: It would have been the department; it would not have been myself directly dealing with that. But after considering media reports I asked the department to do an audit of the actions undertaken in 2018 and 2019 when they initially learned of this data breach. This process identified an additional 11 young people whose names had been improperly searched in the system but who had not been contacted successfully. This was clearly not good enough. I understand the department has now spoken to the families of five of these young people and has left multiple messages with another five. There is one young person who has not been able to be reached at this stage. None of the young people contacted had been contacted by the perpetrator. I also asked my department at the time to update the privacy commissioner in relation to the actions.

Mr RIORDAN: Is that a young person in your care or under the watch of the department that you cannot contact?

Mr DONNELLAN: I could not tell you; I do not have that detail in front of me presently. But what I did at the time was say—

Mr RIORDAN: Mr Rimmer, can the department confirm that we have got young people in our care that we cannot contact?

Mr RIMMER: There might be some other circumstances involved; for example, the child may have left care between the relevant time and now. But Ms Toomey might wish to add something.

Ms TOOMEY: The information that was accessed by the perpetrator was information on clients of the funded provider, Melbourne City Mission. Therefore they are not automatically clients of the department.

Mr RIORDAN: Not automatically. I think it was five families you could not contact and one other that you have not been able to find at all, so how long a period—do we just try once and cannot get hold of them or send a letter and it goes to the dead letter office?

Ms TOOMEY: I understand there were a couple of different avenues pursued. The individuals were all not departmental clients; they were Melbourne City Mission clients as well as department clients.

Mr RIORDAN: But there were department clients—

The CHAIR: Mr Riordan, your time has expired, and I will pass the call to Mr Maas.

Mr MAAS: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Minister and departmental team, for your appearance this afternoon. If I could take you, Minister, to the topic of early intervention and diversion, and take you also to budget paper 3 at page 46, I was hoping you would be able to explain for the committee how the early intervention and diversion initiatives will reduce entries into out-of-home care.

Mr DONNELLAN: Thank you, member.

Mr MAAS: You can take your face mask off.

Mr DONNELLAN: Okay, sorry. I am just used to leaving the thing on now.

Through the *Roadmap for Reform* the Victorian government is delivering a complete overhaul of the way government and community work and support children and families who experience vulnerability, focusing very much on early intervention and evidence-based intensive family preservation and reunification support. Through population growth and the introduction of mandatory reporting of child abuse and neglect, the number of children entering the care system has grown. While the size of our care population remains well below the national average, this growth represents not only poorer outcomes for children, young people and their families

but also a significant cost to government. That is why we are determined to continue and grow our investment in early intervention to provide families with the support they need to remain strong and to slow the demand for statutory child protection response. The early intervention and diversion program seeks funding to support families who are not yet experiencing entrenched complexity by embedding evidence-based programs and practices in universal settings as well as through targeted and specialist services. This offers the greatest opportunity for families to overcome adversity and make enduring positive change to the way they function, reducing the likelihood of progressing deeper into the child and family services system.

The 2021–22 budget invests \$37.9 million over four years for an additional 500 families to receive targeted and specialist casework, including flexible funding to families who need it most to increase parenting capacity, improve family functioning and provide practical support and services to promote safety and wellbeing in the development of children and young people. The investment builds on and complements investments from last year, which started back in April 2020 in the early stages of the pandemic when I announced a \$46 million investment in the Victorian and Aboriginal Family Preservation and Reunification Response. This intensive family preservation and reunification model was in recognition of the impacts of COVID-19 on vulnerable families and their children and the need to target at-risk families before circumstances escalated to the point of asking the court to step in. This response has been delivered through the child and family services providers and Aboriginal community controlled organisations, also partnering with child protection workers to help identify the appropriate families. It uses new evidence-based and therapeutic supports to help families remain together and prevent children from entering care, in addition to providing intensive support so that children in care can safely return home. Through this response agencies will embed contemporary evidence-based practices known to support family preservation and reunification. In a world first, Aboriginal cultural practices known to support Aboriginal children and families will also be documented and embedded across the sector.

Building on what we have launched, the 2020–21 budget in November then invested more than \$335 million over four years to transform the children and family system to focus on that early intervention and prevention, including family preservation and restoration models. This investment cemented the new model of intervention, bringing together these evidence-based interventions to provide more targeted and intensive family support services to those identified as at risk of entering care across the state. It will target priority cohorts that have demonstrated high risk of incidents with child protection and high risk of entering into care, including those families subject to a first-time protection order and families experiencing cumulative harm or subject to an unborn child protection report. By focusing on family services investment in this way and dramatically expanding the availability of specialist supports and therapeutic interventions for families in crisis, we will have the best possible chance of keeping that family together and, most importantly, keeping the child safe, which will in turn prevent a number of cases which end up in the court with a decision to be made about placing that child in state care. Preventing entry into care will also have a positive impact on reducing demand not just for child protection but for other downstream services.

Mr MAAS: Thank you, Minister.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. Mr Hibbins.

Mr HIBBINS: Thanks, Chair. Thank you, Minister and your team, for appearing this evening. On page 204, budget paper 3, the actuals of daily number of children in care placements overall: can I get figures for care placements overall, foster care placements, residential care placements and kinship care placements—how many of those are First Nations children?

Mr DONNELLAN: I think the figure is approximately 25 per cent overall generally. That is a generalised figure. Sorry, I am just looking at officials as I am saying this so I am telling you the truth. It is approximately 25 per cent, which is far too high. It is just not acceptable, and that is why I have got a particular focus to very much look at self-determination and transfer the management of Aboriginal children to Aboriginal community controlled organisations. What we are finding is that family reunification is stronger with the Aboriginal community controlled organisations because of that cultural connection, and they are having a higher success rate than community service organisations in that space specifically with Indigenous children, but overall a higher success rate than community service organisations overall. So that figure is far too high and that is why we have very much got that focus on that early intervention and a focus on that cultural connection and self-determination. That is just a generalisation of the work we are doing in that space.

Mr HIBBINS: Can I get the breakdown of that—on notice—if possible for just those individual—

Mr DONNELLAN: I will not have them based on Indigenous; I will have just broadly based figures obviously on kinship, foster, permanent and other things.

Mr HIBBINS: Yes. So you do not have the First Nations children for those individual—

Mr DONNELLAN: No. I have got a broad figure of 25 per cent. That is it, sorry.

Mr HIBBINS: All right. Thank you. Do you track the outcomes of First Nations children who are removed from their homes—for example, their rates of homelessness and rates of contact with the justice system? Is that something that the department tracks?

Mr DONNELLAN: Well, the department probably does track them, but they are not figures that I would be aware of because that is the justice portfolio, and homes—Richard Wynne—and others, so sorry.

Mr HIBBINS: That is all right. Now, the actual outcome for the target of placing 75 per cent of Aboriginal children with relatives and kin has actually fallen for the last couple of years below that 75 per cent rate. Do we know if there is a reason why that is occurring?

Mr DONNELLAN: My understanding is that it is at 75 per cent so it has not fallen, and that is the highest in the country, Mr Hibbins.

Mr HIBBINS: Okay. The figure I have got is 73.7 per cent in 2020–21 down from 78.8 per cent in 2018–19.

Mr DONNELLAN: Seventy-five per cent recently.

Mr HIBBINS: Okay. Is funding youth refuges within your portfolio duties?

Mr DONNELLAN: No. That would be the Minister for Youth, Minister Spence—or housing. Sorry, housing. I apologise.

Mr HIBBINS: That is specifically housing. Okay. In terms of the number of family services cases provided to Indigenous families is, on page 204, 3281. Is any family receiving support under the child protection—

Mr DONNELLAN: Sorry, can I have that question again?

Mr HIBBINS: I am trying to figure out the question myself.

Mr DONNELLAN: Oh, okay. Good. I got a bit confused, sorry.

Mr HIBBINS: Are any of the families receiving support under the child protection outcome? I will move on to another question if we are struggling with that one.

Mr DONNELLAN: Sorry. Okay.

Mr HIBBINS: How many Aboriginal child protection services are managed by a non-First Nations group or are they all from Aboriginal community controlled organisations?

Mr DONNELLAN: I think we have got 50 per cent approximately. At the moment we have got 50 per cent of children with Aboriginal community controlled organisations. We have got funding to go up to about 70 per cent, from memory, in terms of a focus on transitioning the management of children into ACCOs. Separate from that, which I am sure you would be interested in, is we are also funding the development of Aboriginal community controlled organisations to undertake investigations. So in other words we are training up people from the Indigenous community to actually undertake investigations so we can deal with the issue of what we think could be cultural bias. That is also within the package.

Mr HIBBINS: Thank you. Cheers.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Mr Newbury.

Mr NEWBURY: If I can refer the minister back to the matter that was raised by the Deputy Chair earlier about the data breaches that occurred, I believe, by a youth worker who has since left Melbourne City Mission and had access to the department's database and subsequently accessed the phone numbers and private details of 43 children known to child protection, including a 13-year-old boy who he was later convicted of raping, I understand that only several weeks ago 11 of the 43 children had not been contacted. Have all the kids being contacted?

Mr DONNELLAN: No. As I indicated a little bit earlier, we had spoken to five of the families of the young people and left multiple messages for another five families, and there is one young person they have not been able to reach at this stage. But what was indicated when we spoke to the five families that we were able to contact was that no people had been contacted—none of those 11 had been contacted—by the perpetrator, and at the time I also asked the department to update the privacy commissioner specifically.

Mr NEWBURY: Okay. The offender had access to the database for 13 months. Have you made substantive changes to the way that data is managed?

Mr DONNELLAN: Yes, yes. The investigation was undertaken, as I indicated earlier, with the privacy commissioner. There were recommendations made. All of them were accepted. This included making sure that funded organisations offboard their staff and better monitor their system users as well as the department undertaking its own biannual system audits. The audits require organisations to confirm that active use of CRISSP have a business need to access the system and that any staff member who no longer requires access to the system have their access removed and their use of the system audited. As I was saying, Melbourne City Mission accepted all those, and the department also accepted the recommendations of the privacy commission and introduced biannual audits, training for organisations and the like to ensure that there are the practices—actually, no, I am sorry; I have just been updated. The last is that that young person has now been contacted.

Mr NEWBURY: Thank you.

Mr DONNELLAN: But separately, yes, there were changes in terms of the recommendations, which were accepted, and we implemented them.

Mr NEWBURY: Thank you, and thank you for that additional update. That is great to know. Can I move on to insurance. I know there has been some media recently about insurance companies refusing to cover schools and churches for historic abuse, and it has been reported that organisations in the community sector are being left without insurance cover. Have any Victorian community services organisations on the register of community services been advised that their insurance coverage will be affected or notified that their insurance cover will cease that you are aware of?

Mr DONNELLAN: Not that I am aware of. Just bear with me. I will ask officials just to confirm. Not that we are aware of, no.

Mr NEWBURY: Could I take it on notice if there is?

Mr DONNELLAN: We are happy to take it on notice, yes.

Mr NEWBURY: And if there are any that are unable to get insurance, if you become aware in the future, is there a plan to provide any sort of support?

Mr DONNELLAN: Look, can I come back to you on that? There are allocations within my portfolio for the payout of claims and the like. There is an allocation, but it is managed by justice. So can we come back to you on that?

Mr NEWBURY: I am just looking at BP3, page 46, which is 'Maintaining the foundations of the children and families system', and then on 48, the subsection 'additional funding for the settlement of civil claims for historical institutional'. Do you know, or can you take it on notice, how much that specific subsection is in terms of value, of the total amount on page 46?

Mr DONNELLAN: The total amount? I can—

Mr NEWBURY: No, the total amount is on page 46, but I am saying the subsection on page 48, that dot point I read out, does not break that bigger amount down into each of the dot points.

Mr DONNELLAN: I think we do have figures. Sorry, bear with me. In the 2020–21 budget \$20.8 million has been allocated in 2020–21 to manage and settle civil claims of compensation for abuse suffered by former wards of the state.

Mr NEWBURY: Thank you.

Mr DONNELLAN: For a government commitment to deliver early—sorry.

Mr NEWBURY: Thank you, Minister.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. Ms Richards.

Ms RICHARDS: Thanks, Minister and officials, for appearing tonight, and thank you to the people who do this really complex but important work. I would like to explore the benefits of embedding family services in universal settings and in particular refer you to budget paper 3, page 47, and ask you if you could perhaps explain the benefits of that approach.

Mr DONNELLAN: Yes, for sure. Hopefully some of that will be down near our way, to be honest. Anyway, I cannot ask that as a minister, so I will be quiet and stop being a silly bugger. Look, the \$16.3 million over two years to embed family services into universal settings is a place-based intervention that will be delivered across areas of disadvantage, such as areas where there are high rates of reports to child protection. The model will include family services workers working across 170 universal settings across the state. It might include a school, a kinder, a health service or a maternal and child health service—settings that have been identified for the existing engagement with families. It is a sort of seamless pathway, in a sense, so that you are not having to enter an environment you are not comfortable with in the first place and where there are vulnerabilities, factors which have been identified and obviously where the clients are becoming more complex. In a way it is the easiest point of identifying and supporting families. The family service worker will work with staff in these services as part of the integrated wraparound model. This is designed to provide up to 20 hours of support, including undertaking assessments of need and safety. The service will allow really, really early intervention and provide a child and their family with the support in navigating and accessing other services as well as help with their parenting.

If more intensive supports are needed, families will be linked into Child First or integrated family services. This approach will also provide greater linkages and partnerships with the wider service network and outside the community services sector to ensure an integrated and coordinated response, diverting families away from the targeted and specialist pathways where possible. This approach works with families in places they know well, along with staff they trust, where they feel safe leveraging their relationships in a less stigmatised environment.

Investment to embed family services in universal settings enables the government to identify and respond to issues earlier and is very much consistent with the directions of the *Roadmap for Reform: Strong Families, Safe Children*. Whenever we can identify and engage with families at risk earlier, we are more likely to avoid statutory response down the line, and it very much complements the more targeted and intensive supports provided by the system—so it is good.

Ms RICHARDS: Thanks, Minister. I am interested in family group conferencing—and I refer you to budget paper 3, page 48—and how that can divert children and families away from a statutory response.

Mr DONNELLAN: Yes. I guess in many ways people go through the court system in some ways and the Children's Court system and then the statutory response thereafter. But we are investing \$19.8 million over three years to bring family group conferencing to better support and empower families very much to be involved in the decision-making and planning for their child when involved with child protection. This is a process led by family members and an independent convener to plan and make decisions for a child who is at risk of harm, abuse or neglect. The objective once again is to divert families and children from the statutory services after they come to the attention of child protection. Family group conferencing will be provided to families at the point of the substantiation of a report. A family conferencing convener will work with the family members to address protective concerns of children and prepare plans for child protection endorsement.

Evidence shows the model works. Children and families participating in family group conferencing are less likely to have a subsequent or an ongoing involvement in child protection, which is marvellous. They buy into the process, they take some responsibility and ownership for planning better ways to support their child. The model is used in Queensland, New South Wales and New Zealand to support the diversion of families from further child protection involvement or from the Children's Court's intervention.

A sample of unpublished data from New South Wales indicated approximately 80 per cent of family group conferences resulted in no court orders being made. In New South Wales, between July 2019 and December 2019 there were approximately 427 referrals to family group conferencing, with 350 conferences convened. Of the conferences convened, four out of the five resulted in no court orders being made—a very positive outcome.

Ms RICHARDS: Thanks. Really terrific and important work. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Richards. Mr Limbrick.

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Minister and team, for appearing today. In budget paper 3, on page 48, there is a fast-track program called Frontline Victoria. Would you mind explaining how that is going to work? It seems to imply that people are going to be changing careers, and I am interested to know: what sorts of degrees would they need to have, and what do you envisage to be the career they would be changing from?

Mr DONNELLAN: I do not think there is one career or another we are envisaging. We are looking at people qualified already, whether it be in arts or in law or even in accounting, for argument's sake. So it is about looking at people who have got existing degrees, who have got existing skills, who have worked in the workplace already, and then looking to very much fast-track them through the child protection system in a sense. In other words, develop a model of training and accreditation for units to actually in a sense recognise they are very qualified already, but actually have fast-tracking of skill base and learning on the job to actually get them ready and sort of fast-track them through. In other words—and this is just really in the initial stages of development—if they were a CP level 3, they might come in at a CP level 3, which would be sort of a lower level, but would fast-track through to a higher level 4 or 5 because of the fact that they have already got substantial work experience, skills and the like, and then we would add to those existing skills to get them very much ready for child protection. In terms of human services, there is so much demand for human services, whether it be in mental wellness, child protection and the like, that we looked to the UK for this model to actually do the work, and it seems to work very well in the UK. They have got a sophisticated child protection system—very much a place-based child protection system; local council based—and they found that that worked very well. So we are looking to use that because, whether it be mental health, family violence, child protection, aged care or disability care, there is just so much competition that we sort of needed to look outside the box to find other people who we might be able to convince to come into the sector and do the great work they do.

Mr LIMBRICK: And how would you market that? You know, changing careers is a big deal, right? Or is this something that you are developing at the moment?

Mr DONNELLAN: This is developing, so I would be pontificating and guessing, and I am not very involved in that space. I am definitely not—

Mr LIMBRICK: Yes. Okay. It is in the very initial stages, but the idea is, if I am hearing you correctly, that you have got labour shortages and you are trying to come up with ways of—

Mr DONNELLAN: Yes, and I think this is going to apply across the board of human services—you know, not just in child protection.

Mr LIMBRICK: I think there was an announcement from the Premier on 10 March—you spoke about this earlier—with Aboriginal organisations to lead the child protection support. What is the money allocated to that actually going to be used for? Is this like additional services or is this a transferring of services?

Mr DONNELLAN: It is, one, getting the Aboriginal community organisations set up and ready to go to actually accept child protection—so in other words staffing and things like that—but then there is a transfer of

the management of children from an existing community service organisation or the department into the Aboriginal community controlled organisations. So they have got 50 per cent approximately now. Or is it—

Mr ALISANDRATOS: It is 50 per cent.

Mr DONNELLAN: Yes. It is nine-hundred-and-something children in total, isn't it?

Mr ALISANDRATOS: Yes.

Mr DONNELLAN: It is 833 children in total. Fifty per cent of them are now with Aboriginal community controlled organisations, and what we are finding is that with things like family preservation, reunification and so forth we are getting better outcomes because of that connection to culture than with community service organisations or the department trying to do that work.

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you.

Mr DONNELLAN: So it is positive, but it has still got a long way to go.

Mr LIMBRICK: All right.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. Ms Taylor.

Ms TAYLOR: Thank you, Minister and department officials. If I can direct you to budget paper 3, page 47, which states that Aboriginal community controlled organisations will continue to receive funding for Koori supported playgroups, can you please provide information about the benefits for parents from Koori supported playgroups?

Mr DONNELLAN: Yes. It is sort of a name that in many ways does not fully reflect what it actually is, because it is actually more than just a playgroup. It is actually a training session for parents as well in how to engage with the child a bit better. The \$2.57 million was allocated over four years so Aboriginal community controlled organisations can give 400 families each year access to Koori supported playgroups and in-home parent coaching—that is the second component of it. Supported playgroups are led by facilitators who deliver evidence-based parenting support interventions to families in the targeted group. Koori supported playgroups are provided by three ACCOs across eight metropolitan and regional locations. They support parents and children from birth to four years to provide warm and nurturing relationships and to improve the quality of early home learning environments. They provide a culturally safe and engaging setting in which parents can develop their skill and confidence to support their child's wellbeing and development within an Aboriginal cultural framework. As well as enjoying a range of activities together, families also have an opportunity to find out about local services and support networks in the community. I visited one recently—I think it was in Ballarat—in terms of one of the Aboriginal community controlled kinders. What we are actually finding is that they are running programs like that in there, but the broader community are very desirous of actually also sending their kids there, which I thought was a very positive outcome, to get an understanding of our First Peoples. So it was a positive.

Ms TAYLOR: Excellent. Thank you. If I can now refer you to budget paper 3, page 48, and the initiative 'Maintaining the foundations of the children and families system', noting it is incredibly hard work but incredibly rewarding when we are looking at child protection. In order to make sure that we can maintain that strong workforce and to provide that critical work, how will the investment from this budget ensure that the case loads are manageable and that children can actually be protected?

Mr DONNELLAN: Thank you. As I referenced in the opening slides, over the seven years of this government we have made an unprecedented commitment to adding more child protection workers. To date, I think it is about 1180 that we have funded since we came back in. These are the people who answer the call when we get reports of a child being neglected and abused, and it is incredibly difficult work. The Victorian government funds child protection to accept and respond to reports of child abuse and neglect; undertake protective investigations; case plan, where abuse is as substantiated; and provide case management for children who have been assessed to be in need of protection and subject to child court orders, including those requiring state care.

As demand for child protection statutory response grows, so too must our child protection workforce. This budget funds an additional 280 child protection workers to ensure the child protection workforce is adequately resourced to provide vital support to families in crisis and to keep children safe. This means there has been an increase in funding for child protection workers—1180, as I have indicated, since 2014. This budget also funds 487 child protection practitioners, originally funded in 2018 and lapsing as of June this year. This investment will continue to reduce the individual workloads of child protection staff and increase the allocation rate so that more children have a dedicated worker who can spend more time and more meaningful time with them. We have already seen the benefits of this. Looking at the higher allocation rates—I think currently the rate of allocated cases has risen to 88 per cent—even though there are more children in child protection, a greater proportion of them are assigned directly to a child protection practitioner.

At the 2020–21 budget in November we also made a point of funding additional staff to do the tasks that the high-level case-carrying practitioners do not need to do, so in other words an administrative unit deliberately to provide support to child protection practitioners, to do a lot of the administrative work to make their life a little bit easier.

Ms TAYLOR: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Taylor. I will pass the call to Mr O'Brien.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Thank you, Chair. Minister, can I just follow up on some Indigenous questions as well. The questionnaire on page 40 says that \$31.5 million will go towards Indigenous children known to child protection and out-of-home care over a four-year period. Can you explain, of that funding, what portion is going towards early intervention and prevention programs and initiatives?

Mr DONNELLAN: Yes. Look, there is funding there for obviously the Aboriginal community controlled organisations to provide for 400 Aboriginal families, as I was just mentioning a moment ago. So that is part of that early intervention. That is part of the \$15.6 million of output appropriation. Funding will also pilot a new employment program, obviously Frontline Victoria, to actually get more skilled people in there and also includes a trial to embed family services in universal settings such as schools early—so, in other words, identifying issues early and actually getting in to assist people early, so whether it be kinder, maternal and child health services. And there is also funding for 200 kinship case management targets to support the transfer of case management of Aboriginal children to get that figure up to 70 per cent, as I was indicating a little bit earlier, and then also 171 intensive 200-hour family support targets to support reunification and work with unborn—

Mr D O'BRIEN: So perhaps could you give me even a percentage of how much of the funding for Aboriginal children is actually going to that early intervention?

Mr DONNELLAN: Well, look, it depends. If you look at, say, Home Stretch, for argument's sake, you would call that a latter-day intervention, but it is an early intervention in terms of justice, for argument's sake, because you know that if you do not to support children when they are leaving care—and that includes Aboriginal children—the likelihood of them ending up in homelessness or unemployed is very high. So it depends on how you define 'early'. That is a latter-day intervention. Then we have got embedding, as we were saying a little bit earlier, family services in universal settings, whether it be maternal and child health or whether it be in kinders or the like, so that you can actually intervene early. So I guess in many ways you have got to fund both—your statutory obligations, and then at the same time you are funding innovation to actually keep people out of the statutory system.

Mr D O'BRIEN: To try and keep them out of it, yes. Can I perhaps just get in another data question? I am happy for you to take it on notice if you do not have it. What is the total amount allocated under the child protection outputs specifically for Indigenous children?

Mr DONNELLAN: I probably will not have a figure for that specifically. I am happy to take that on notice.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Well, probably to answer the question better, is that figure available? Is it calculable or not?

Mr DONNELLAN: We could give it a go for you.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Okay. That would be great.

Mr DONNELLAN: Yes. Sorry, I am not trying to be evasive; it is just we do not break it down like that.

Mr D O'BRIEN: No, that is fine. The data from the institute of health and welfare highlights the over-representation of Indigenous children in child protection in Victoria, particularly proportionally compared to other states. We are well above, which I think Mr Hibbins might have raised. So just I wonder whether you can provide how the department's performance will be measured when it comes to a few issues: one, reducing the number of Indigenous children in out-of-home care; two, reunifying Indigenous children with their families where safe; and, three, measuring the responsiveness of the department to support young Indigenous and children and keep them safe in Victoria—which is, with a minute ago, a lot of questions. I am happy for you to take them on notice, but I guess what we are looking for is: what will success look like? How will we actually know that you have made a difference?

Mr DONNELLAN: I am happy to take that on notice, but I will say that the Australian institute of health report also found that we have the lowest rate of entries into out-of-home care across the board, including Indigenous children, at 6.3 per thousand compared to the national average of 8.1 per thousand. We had the strongest adherence to the Aboriginal placement principle, at 75 per cent with kin or family or with the Indigenous community. We also had—

Mr D O'BRIEN: Didn't the report find that Victoria was failing to comply with that principle?

Mr DONNELLAN: No, that we were actually the best. We had the highest compliance rate and we also had the highest level of family services provided across the child protection systems in the country to actually try and divert people out of the statutory system.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Okay. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Mr Richardson.

Mr RICHARDSON: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Minister and department officials, for joining us. Minister, I want to take you to the topic of child protection navigators, and I refer to your presentation. You mentioned that part of the new child protection workforce includes 34 child protection navigators. For the committee's benefit, Minister, are you able to explain the role of these child protection navigators?

Mr DONNELLAN: Yes. They are going to be marvellous. They are part of the early intervention, but they are going to have a key role in our workforce, and the key role will be part of the intensive family preservation reunification model. So in other words they are going to be in a sense facilitators between the community service organisations at the department and the families in many ways. So they are, I guess, hustlers, to make sure we are actually chasing the standard and getting the right outcomes. So they will proactively identify children and young people at risk of entry into care and those that meet the targeted group for the model. So in other words, one, the families have got to be prepared to engage. It is no use trying to drag people kicking and screaming to this engagement, because it will not actually work. So in other words they have to identify, one, if it is a child at risk. They support the timely connection of these children and families with intensive targeted supports, so they are responsible for the referrals and the engagement to ensure the families get the help they need. They facilitate collaborative practice between our commissioned service providers in child protection, ensuring seamless joined-up service responses, so they are a key to what is best described as a partnership model. They also provide practice leadership across child protection and child and family services. And these are senior child protection practitioners, so with substantial experience. I have met with a couple of the navigators in Bendigo and Frankston in recent times, and they are incredibly positive about the role they have in terms of what they are seeing initially in terms of this family preservation and reunification model. So while the model is still new, as I was saying, the early reports are very positive and suggest the work of the navigators is resulting in these children and families getting the help they needed.

The 2021–22 budget outcomes provide for continuation and expansion of these positions from 23 to 34, and I very much look forward to this cohort of our workforce delivering significant benefits to vulnerable families and for the system. So, look, I am very, very hopeful that these navigators will deliver great outcomes for families and children.

Mr RICHARDSON: Maintaining that focus on workforce, Minister, I want to take you to the topic of budget paper 3, page 48, and a new initiative, Frontline Victoria. Are you able to elaborate a bit more on this initiative and how it will assist the children and families sector workforce?

Mr DONNELLAN: Yes. That is a \$13.5 million investment for the program. As I was saying, we got our inspiration from the UK. It is intended, as I was saying a little bit earlier, for us to take degree-qualified career changers into a career in the child and family services system, developing their academic and practice knowledge in tandem. This scheme was introduced in the UK in 2013 and trains high-calibre graduates and career changers for employment in the UK child protection system. The training is heavily practice based with a fast-tracked structured social work curriculum that results in the provision of a masters-level accredited social work qualification, which I had forgotten about earlier.

The bespoke Victorian frontline program will promote child and family services as a preferred career destination for high-performing candidates; attract, rapidly train and retain a broader range of high-performing prospective new entrants to the sector; improve practice by providing a tailored response for different cohorts and promote safety; address this need in advance of self-determination; direct children and families to the right service at the right time; develop practice leaders to drive child and family services reform objectives and reduce siloed service responses, which is something we are working very hard on at the moment; integrate and coordinate services to create pathways to support the right mix, sequence and intensity; and include the development of a suitable curriculum to enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Victorians with considerable professional experience and cultural expertise that do not hold a bachelor qualification to enter the program.

The philosophy behind this is all pretty simple and effective: to entice high-quality, mature, work-ready candidates, particularly career changers, with the right attributes for social work, who can step in and get up to speed really quickly.

Mr RICHARDSON: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Richardson, and thank you, Minister. That concludes the time we have set aside for consideration of the child protection portfolio. Thank you for appearing before the committee today in this capacity. The committee will follow up on any questions taken on notice in writing, and responses will be required within 10 working days of the committee's request.

The committee will now take a short break before moving to consideration of the disability, ageing and carers portfolio with you at 6.15 pm. Thank you.

Mr DONNELLAN: Thanks.

Witnesses withdrew.