

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

2021–22 Budget Estimates

Melbourne—Monday, 21 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

Ms Ingrid Stitt, MLC, Minister for Early Childhood,

Ms Jenny Atta, PSM, Secretary,

Ms Kim Little, Deputy Secretary, Early Childhood Education,

Mr Anthony Bates, PSM, Deputy Secretary, Financial Policy and Information Services, and

Ms Jessica Trinder, Executive Director, Asset Management and Strategy, Victorian School Building Authority, Department of Education and Training.

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

I would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional Aboriginal owners of the land on which we are meeting. We pay our respects to them, their culture, their elders past, present and future and elders from other communities who may be here today.

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.

We ask that mobile telephones and computers 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.

Witnesses will be provided with a proof version of the transcript to check. Verified transcripts, presentations and handouts will be placed on the committee's website as soon as possible.

Before we start, I note that Mr Hibbins is an apology as he is unwell, and Mr Richardson is caught in the traffic jam on the Monash Freeway but will be joining us.

We welcome Minister Stitt, in the first instance for the early childhood portfolio. We invite you to make a brief opening statement, and this will be followed by questions from the committee. Thank you.

Visual presentation.

Ms STITT: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, committee members, for the opportunity to appear before you today. I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we are gathered and pay my respects to their elders past, present and emerging, and acknowledge any Aboriginal people joining us today.

The budget continues our commitment to our early learners by investing \$400.7 million to give them the best start in life. This includes funding towards the delivery of our landmark initiative, universal three-year-old kinder. This budget offers significant targeted support for Victoria's most vulnerable children and continues our program of initiatives to attract and retain staff in the sector in collaboration with employers and unions. This investment builds on the strong foundation of previous years. As you can see from this slide, we have delivered more than \$2.2 billion in new initiatives in the past three years, which is double the previous eight years combined. The significant investment means Victoria will be the only state in Australia to provide universal kindergarten to three-year-old children, whether in sessional kinders or in kinder programs in long day care. This year's budget builds on investments from the Labor government over the past six years, with \$2.9 billion invested in early childhood to ensure every child is ready for school and ready for life.

This year 15 more regional local government areas joined the rollout of three-year-old kinder, and now around 2500 children are enrolled at over 170 services. Thanks to further investment of \$167.1 million, Victorian children right across the state will have access to funded programs next year. By 2029 about 90 000 children

will benefit. The funding support for three-year-old kinder rollout includes \$44.8 million for upgrades and to build new kindergartens at schools so families can avoid the double drop-off. The funding also includes \$32.4 million over four years to continue to attract 6000 more teachers and educators by 2029 and to retain and upskill the staff already in the sector. We have provided more than 2000 scholarships to aspiring teachers and financial incentives to over 35 teachers to work in hard-to-staff regional areas. Free TAFE continues to attract new people to the sector; a thousand students are enrolled in courses in 2021. There is also an additional \$31.2 million over four years to support our not-for-profit and local government early years management services. The investment will boost funding for existing services and meet demand for new services.

To give vulnerable and disadvantaged children the best start in life there is \$33.8 million to make sure they can access kindergarten programs. The funding includes \$4.4 million to establish two safe haven sites to provide intensive support for children impacted by trauma. There is \$3.2 million for intensive support packages so children with complex needs as a result of trauma can be engaged at their local kinder each year. \$11.4 million will bring the access to early learning program to new locations. There is \$1.7 million to expand the kinder program at the Royal Children's Hospital Education Institute. As part of the \$39.3 million Marrung Koori initiatives package there is \$8 million to expand the Koori Preschool Assistance Program to four new locations and continue the Koori families as First Educators Program. An additional \$2.7 million continues the successful early childhood languages program currently being delivered in 161 kinders to around 6000 children.

The budget provides \$91.6 million to set up and maintain the Child Link register, a digital platform that enables the sharing of information to protect child safety and wellbeing. This initiative further strengthens the child information sharing scheme, which is a key recommendation from the McClellan Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. The register will support sharing of critical information so professionals working with children can collaborate to ensure children get the best support they need when they need it.

Excellent early childhood education transforms lives. After such a difficult year in 2020, it is more important than ever that children receive a high-quality education well before they start school. Our continued investment supports children to have access to great kindergarten programs no matter where they live or what their background is. Thank you, Chair. I will conclude my presentation there.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. Mr Maas.

Mr MAAS: Thank you, Chair. Good morning, Minister, and good morning, departmental officials. Thank you for your time and for your appearance this morning. Minister, if I could take you to the topic of the Ready for School three-year-old kindergarten initiative and specifically budget paper 3, page 21, I was hoping that you would be able to explain for the committee how this initiative is progressing and how the additional funding will help support the implementation.

Ms STITT: Thank you, Mr Maas. I would be very pleased to do that. Obviously the three-year-old kindergarten rollout is the largest early childhood investment in our state's history, and it is exciting that more children next year will have access to this landmark reform. In fact we will be the only Australian jurisdiction where this educational benefit is universally available. We have worked very collaboratively with the early childhood sector providers to deliver across 21 local government areas three-year-old kinder to date. There has been a terrific take-up of that initiative. We have got over 2500 children now benefiting from that reform in regional Victoria, and around 90 per cent of services across these local government areas are delivering a funded three-year-old kindergarten program. Really pleasingly, many of them are offering the full 15-hour program per week already, well ahead of our projected number of hours attached to the reform. So now, following the success of the first two-year rollout, we are now focusing on the statewide rollout which will occur next year where families right across the state will be able to enrol their three-year-olds in a quality kindergarten program. Hours will be progressively scaled up; we expect that the full 15 hours per week will be available for three-year-olds by 2029. The full rollout in 2029 will probably see around 90 000 children, based on our modelling, benefiting from the reform each year, which is a wonderful thing and really builds on our strong four-year-old kindergarten program.

In this year's budget we will be investing \$167.1 million to ensure that we are really well prepared for that statewide rollout next year. Of that funding, \$32.4 million will be invested over four years to expand the workforce attraction and retention activities. Our reform will create around 6000 new jobs—that is

4000 teachers and 2000 educators—and we want to ensure the profession is supported with mentoring, professional development and incentives to work particularly in those hard-to-staff locations in some of our smaller rural and regional areas. We also want incentives there for people to come back, to return to the sector who might have left the sector in the past. We are also working really hard to make sure there is a strong pipeline of graduates coming into the sector, so there are some key activities already underway in this regard. We have got 2000 scholarships that have been awarded to support people to study to become early childhood teachers; we have the free TAFE initiative, which has been highly successful, and we will keep attracting new educators to undertake the cert III and cert IV TAFE courses; and we are supporting new graduates with mentoring and coaching support, which is incredibly important when people are coming out of their tertiary studies to make sure in that first couple of years when they graduate they really get that strong mentoring so that they want to stay in the sector.

To ensure that we have got an adequate supply of modern learning facilities, the budget also invests \$44.82 million to build kindergartens on new and existing school sites, helping more parents ditch that double drop-off of kinder and school. It also supports children to make a very seamless transition from kindergarten to school. I have been to a number of these kindergarten on school site projects in the last six months, and I can tell you that they are incredibly popular not just with parents but with the school community as well because of the really strong ties that they build between the kinder staff and the primary schools. To date, 20 government supported infrastructure projects have been completed, and a further 72 projects are in the pipeline for completion over the next two years.

Obviously discussions are well progressed with each local government area in readiness for the rollout of three-year-old kinder next year, and we have got the department and the VSBA working hard to secure kindergarten infrastructure and service plans, or KISPs, with our local government partners. Each KISP does a lot of work in relation to estimating the growth in demand for kindergarten places in particular local government areas, which is obviously very important when we are planning such a big rollout of a very big reform. That will provide a really clear picture of demand for kindergarten and the infrastructure needs right across the state. We have already had more than 50 of these agreements signed or agreed in principle.

To support the sector to prepare for this change and to drive large-scale knowledge sharing the department has run a series of professional development networks and forums for kindergarten program leaders and service providers. There is an enormous amount of change-management work going on between the department and service providers, as you can imagine, and that is progressing really well. We have got the kindergarten expansion consultative committee that was set up at the beginning of this reform, which has been working very collaboratively with peak bodies to support the rollout, and we will continue throughout the year to work closely with all of the key stakeholders in the sector.

Three-year-old kinder—there is no question it is a nation-leading reform. All of the research tells us that children's development in terms of their brain is in the first five years of life, so the more we can provide quality kindergarten education for both three- and four-year-olds, the more chance we are giving children to thrive by the time they are ready for school. I am confident that we are on track for a successful rollout of the three-year-old kindergarten reform in 2022, and with this will come thousands of jobs, which I think will be fantastic not only for the economy and for the community but also for our children who will benefit from being taught by high-quality teachers and educators right across the state.

Mr MAAS: Thanks very much, Minister. I am just really interested as to why two years over one year. What are the benefits of two years of universal education for our children in kindergarten?

Ms STITT: It is a great question and something I think that is becoming more understood by parents as we roll out three-year-old kinder across a number of local government areas now. All of the evidence does point to two years of kindergarten being better than one, especially for children who are most likely to be developmentally vulnerable. The best thing we can do for any child who has any level of learning development issue or vulnerability is to provide access to a universal program of kindergarten, and we know that children that start kinder at the age of three can gain academic, health, wellbeing and emotional and social benefits that can last into their school years and beyond. There is evidence from both here and overseas that providing access to high-quality three-year-old preschool programs really does lay that foundation for enduring success at school in a range of outcomes that matter in terms of prosperity, including literacy, numeracy and social and emotional wellbeing. I would not want people to get the impression that there are lines of school desks in three-year-old

kinder. This is still a play-based approach to learning for three- and four-year-olds in our wonderful kinder services in Victoria, but it does really lay that foundation for every chance of succeeding in school when they do start to work more closely with literacy and numeracy.

So the kindergarten programs are led by a qualified teacher and educator. They are well planned and evaluated, and they cater for the needs of each individual child. And kinder helps children get along with others, which is an incredibly important skill for them to build. It helps them to be creative and collaborative and to also start from a very young age problem-solving, so these are all really important skills for life that they are learning in the context of a three- and four-year-old play-based approach. They extend children's thinking. They encourage them to ask questions and engage in conversation about things that excite them and integrate learning into play and exploration.

Whenever I visit a kinder, which is as often as I can, I am always struck by the incredible skill of our teachers and educators in the sector. I think that more and more people in the community are starting to see the real value of these jobs. I think for a long time they might have been jobs that we saw as just babysitting or caring or child care. But in fact it is all about education from an early stage of a child's life, and I think that these sorts of roles really ought to be right up there and valued in the same way that we value schoolteachers and other professions that are involved in caring for members of our community. So I am really proud of the Labor government's \$5 billion investment in early childhood. I think that more and more we will see as this reform is rolled out there are huge benefits that children will gain from the reform.

Mr MAAS: Thank you, Minister. Many of us here have electorates which are culturally and linguistically diverse. I was wondering what is happening in relation to those families and how they are being engaged to encourage their children to go to kinder.

Ms STITT: Thank you. It is a great question, and we are really committed to making sure that families understand the benefits of kindergarten for three-year-olds and ultimately enrol in a program. So what we have been very keen to make sure we do is to provide materials translated into a diverse range of languages to reflect the diversity of the Victorian community and make sure that parents have got access to that information if English is not their first language. They are being distributed by the channels where we know families engage, so within early childhood services, through our wonderful maternal and child health services we are providing that translated material, through social media and a statewide advertising campaign and via multicultural community groups, so that peer-to-peer sharing of information about the importance of kindergarten and three-year-old kindergarten.

It is also important to note that kindergarten is not a building; it is a program, and it can be delivered in a range of different settings. As well as standalone sessional kindergarten there are really high quality kindergarten programs being run in our long day care centres across the state. One of the things we were keen to do was to launch the Kinder Tick initiative this year, which is to make sure that parents can understand where kindergarten programs are available in their local community. So whether it is a standalone service or in a long day care setting, families can be confident when they see that Kinder Tick that there is a funded play-based kindergarten program being run, led by a qualified kindergarten teacher. We think that with that suite of initiatives we will be able to reach CALD communities right across the state and make sure that their children benefit from these reforms as well.

Mr MAAS: Thanks, Minister. I would like to move to support for vulnerable children now, and I was hoping you would be able to talk about how the budget is supporting those children.

Ms STITT: Thank you. The budget does deliver \$33.8 million to provide tailored support for vulnerable and disadvantaged children to participate in early childhood education and care and to help ensure that no child is left behind. This additional investment ensures targeted support for some of our most vulnerable children, including those children known to child protection and children who have experienced complex trauma—for example, family violence—but also children who might have a disability, so that we are making sure that access is open to children of all abilities. Whilst we have made significant improvements in this area, we know there is more work to be done, and the package does build on previous investments, including \$24.3 million in last year's budget, to support more children with a developmental delay or a disability through the kindergarten inclusion support package. We will be able to expand access to the early learning program to a further 12 sites through this funding, enabling children aged three and four with complex needs to fully participate in a high-

quality early learning program. These programs provide intensive wraparound support to the child and the family for two years, and they strengthen the home learning environment.

Mr MAAS: Thanks very much, Minister.

Ms STITT: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. Mr O'Brien.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Thank you, Chair. Good morning, Minister and officials. Minister, I would also like to talk about kindergarten attendance. Budget paper 3, page 152, lists some of the data there, in particular that for the 2020–21 year the participation rate for kinder in the year before school fell to 89.1 per cent against a target of 96. With the figure above of 80 000 being available to attend preschool, that drop of 6.9 per cent against your target represents, by my calculations, about 5500 children. Is it good enough that 5500 children did not go to kinder last year because you missed your target?

Ms STITT: Thank you, Mr O'Brien. I think I will just take you through the figures, if I can. Obviously in the 2020 calendar year for four-year-old kindergarten participation the rate did fall compared to the previous year to 89.1 per cent. There were, by my figures, 79 850 funded four-year-old enrolments in 2020. This was slightly higher than 2019 but lower than the target of 81 000. I think that this can be directly attributed to the impacts of COVID-19, with less children being enrolled at the beginning of term 2. There were a range of factors in this, including a reduction in international and interstate migration and also parents electing to keep their children at home during restrictions, notwithstanding that many of the early childhood services did remain open. I think there was probably quite an understandable reaction on the part of many parents to keep their children back.

Mr D O'BRIEN: I appreciate the drop in population, as you mentioned, Minister, but the question and that performance measure is actually the participation rate, so it is actually the kids available, and we have got 11 per cent of kids effectively not actually attending kinder. Basically the participation rate has fallen under this government from 98.2 per cent in 2014 to just 89.1 per cent. How many thousands of children are now missing out on kindergarten?

Ms STITT: Well, I think overall, Mr O'Brien, we do have strong participation rates in Victoria, including in comparison to other states and territories. There are some technical reasons why the data has thrown up some of these factors, which I am happy to ask the Deputy Secretary to make a few comments about because it goes to a number of issues, including population. So I might ask Ms Little just to—

Mr D O'BRIEN: Well, again, though, population is one thing but this is the participation rate, so of the population that is there, it has dramatically fallen. That is the question.

Ms STITT: Ms Little?

Ms LITTLE: I am happy to speak to this. Thank you very much for the question. I might say something initially about 2020 and then talk about the broader data to go to your question. In relation to 2020 one of the things we are seeing affect the participation rate, as you point out, is that the denominator that is provided by the ABS does not get recalculated on a year-by-year basis based on what actually happens to the population. So while it would certainly be the case that some parents chose not to enrol their children across the course of the year, normally we have about 3000 children who are not enrolled at the start of the year but whose parents enrol them across the course of the year, let us say, because they move from another state or because they move from another country or because they move within the state. I will go on to the broader data in a moment, but one of the things we are seeing happening in 2020 is obviously there were some children who normally would have been present in the denominator because they would have come from another state or come from another country who simply did not come to Victoria because of the COVID situation.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Well—

Ms LITTLE: If you do not mind, if I just go to the point about the rate: if we look at the data at the start of the year, we were on track as at the start of the year to have a participation rate of around the level of 92 per cent, but because of—

Mr D O'BRIEN: But even that is 4 per cent below your target. The participation rate has been declining since 2015. The question still stands—the actual data question I asked—which was: how many children who qualify are not currently going to kinder?

Ms LITTLE: I am happy to go on to that. Firstly there is an issue with the dominator in 2020, so that is worth noting—that the actual participation rate is likely to have been higher than is shown in the data because of the issues affecting the denominator. In terms of the data over a longer period, however—

Mr D O'BRIEN: Well, I am specifically after a number. Do you know how many children actually did not go to a kinder in the last year that should have been?

Ms LITTLE: In terms of the current participation rate, what it would have been had we not had the impact of COVID—it probably would have been around 92 per cent. The 92 to 93 per cent rate is what we have seen over recent years, so—

Mr D O'BRIEN: Yes. Based on the numbers in the budget paper, that is still 3000 or 4000 kids. That is what I am trying to get: have you got an actual number of how many children are not attending kinder that should be?

Ms LITTLE: We are happy to come back to you on that based on whatever the latest ABS data is. The one thing I would say is that that ABS data is an estimate, and that leads me on to my next point. In terms of the data sequence that you are pointing to, it is the case that we are below the BP3 target. The BP3 target is ambitious, and we want every child in fact to be able to go to kindergarten. The performance is—

Mr D O'BRIEN: Well, the target is only 96 per cent.

The CHAIR: Mr O'Brien, if you could allow Ms Little to answer the question, please.

Ms LITTLE: The performance in Victoria is strong on both an international and a national basis, but the target that has been set is an ambitious target because, as the minister has said, we do want all children, including vulnerable children, including children from newly arrived migrant communities, including children from whole range of backgrounds, to attend kindergarten.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Okay.

Ms LITTLE: So we can come back to you on the issue of the ABS data and what the range is likely to be, given the issues about what has been affected in the ABS data around that number. I will flag that there will be some elements of estimate in that because of the impact we have seen on that data through COVID and it not being as reliable last year as it would normally be around a denominator, if that makes sense.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Yes, okay. Minister, can I get to the nub of it, though. Irrespective of the denominators, COVID or not, in 2014 the budget papers show we had a 98 per cent participation rate. We are down to now 89.1 per cent. When will you commit to getting kinder participation back to the 2014 levels of 98 per cent or above?

Ms STITT: Well, we obviously take participation in kindergarten extremely seriously, and our investment in early childhood education, including the rollout of three-year-old kindergarten, includes really targeting the need for it to be universal in nature. We will be working extremely hard to lift those participation rates, particularly for children who, as I have been talking about previously, are vulnerable and stand to gain the most from universal access.

Mr D O'BRIEN: But do you have a year that you are aiming to get the figures back up by?

Ms STITT: Well, we have targets for participation every year. They are, as Ms Little has indicated, ambitious. And I think that—

Mr D O'BRIEN: No. Actually, Minister, they are not. I mean 96 per cent was the target last year and this year. We actually hit 98 per cent in 2014, so we are actually lower than we were seven years ago.

Ms STITT: Well, Mr O'Brien, I am not trying to be evasive in my answer, I am just indicating to you that there were some extraordinary circumstances in 2020 that have impacted the participation rates. Of course we are going to be focusing our attention on not only rolling out the reforms that I have been talking about but making sure that as many children as possible can participate in these really important early childhood education programs.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Okay. Speaking of which—and you just mentioned vulnerable children in particular—are you able to tell me how many three- and four-year-old children in out-of-home care currently known to child protection or classified as vulnerable did not attend kinder last year?

Ms STITT: In 2020 the number of children enrolled in three-year-old kindergarten or enrolled in the Early Start kindergarten program who are known to child protection was 1954, which represents around 42 per cent of children known to child protection enrolled in an ESK or an AEL program. And as I was in the process—

Mr D O'BRIEN: That was three-year-olds, sorry, Minister?

Ms STITT: That is three-year-old. In terms of our four-year-old figures—just bear with me—80 per cent of four-year-old children known to child protection are enrolled in kindergarten. And as I was in the process of explaining to Mr Maas, the 2021–22 budget has \$33.8 million over four years to target support to make sure that we are concentrating on lifting that participation rate, particularly in the three-year-old area as we roll out three-year-old kindergarten across the state, but also to maintain and improve our four-year-old kindergarten participation rates for vulnerable children. These children stand to gain the most out of access to kindergarten programs, and it is something that I am personally very committed to seeing through and making sure that the supports that we have in place in the budget are actually really targeted in the right areas.

Mr D O'BRIEN: On that group in particular, do you have an understanding of the extent to which some of those children are blocked from accessing kindergarten because they do not have proof-of-life documentation—birth certificates and the like?

Ms STITT: Look, I do not have those figures at hand. I am familiar with this issue. I think one of your colleagues has been op-edding about it recently.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Is it data that the department keeps?

Ms STITT: Ms Little, are we able to supply Mr O'Brien with an answer to that?

Ms LITTLE: Yes, we can certainly work with our colleagues in the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing. The one thing I would flag is it is entirely possible to enrol a child in a kindergarten program without having a birth certificate. That is not a requirement of that program. I think maybe we need to dig a bit deeper talking to our colleagues about what the issue is that the stakeholder has been raising around that. It is certainly not a requirement of this department that a birth certificate be present.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Is it a blockage at all at individual kinders?

Ms LITTLE: Not that we know of, but we are happy to speak to our colleagues and see whether or not it is an issue that has been raised. If it is, then there are certainly ways to resolve that issue, but it is not an issue with the way the kindergarten system works or what the requirements are.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Mr Limbrick.

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Minister and team, for coming today. I have got a couple of questions about Child Link. On budget paper 3, page 30, there is \$5.5 million of funding for an asset initiative for Child Link and on budget paper 3, page 21, there is other funding for Child Link. Can I just clarify—is that asset initiative for the development of the software? My understanding is it is like a database or a software application. Is that \$5.5 million for the software development?

Ms STITT: The budget provides \$86.1 million over the forward estimates in output funding, and the \$5.4 million is for the asset of the IT system. Mr Bates might want to add to that.

Mr BATES: Yes. Thanks, Minister. That is basically for the finalisation of the core software. A lot of it will be software as a service, so the ongoing running cost will be in the output line, but as we do finalise the core build that asset component is for the core identity matching and other parts of the database.

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you. So what is the current status of this software at the moment? Is this something that is being purchased off the shelf, or is this something that is being developed in-house? What is the status of it?

Ms STITT: It is a web-based platform, and it will display a thin layer of consolidated information about a child and key family members. There will be some work done to ensure that it is fit for the purpose it is intended, so I think in that sense it is not off the shelf and there will be some retrofitting of it to meet the needs of the department on this one, so it will combine factual information from across universal services and include services' contact details to encourage cross-service collaboration and facilitate more holistic support around children. The funding is going to a number of things. I am happy to run through a few of those details if you want me to, Mr Limbrick.

Mr LIMBRICK: Look, I am sort of interested in this application. What I am getting to is when will the application be ready? I know that there have been lots of problems with IT projects in the past with overruns and delays and things like that. When will it be ready, and what will that funding be used for before it is ready?

Ms STITT: Okay. Over five years there is the budget allocation of \$86.1 million. The finalisation of the Child Link technical build and implementation of the Child Link register are in 2022. Some of the funding will go towards the training required to be provided to authorised users as part of the Child Link user onboarding system, and the evaluation of each pilot site is also an important part of the rollout to ensure the technology, the operational process and the workforce practices support the wellbeing and the safety of children as the Child Link is being rolled out. The launch of the data insights function is to inform the service delivery. So there are a range of both technical and support measures that are incorporated in this budget line item.

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you, Minister. My understanding of how it is going to be working is that it is something that will be used by existing staff to give them more information and insights and to share information. That sounds fine, but I am just wondering because this is a very large amount of money—over \$20 million a year over the forward estimates. How much of that is actually just paying for the ongoing software service, and what is the rest of it actually being used for?

Ms STITT: I might actually ask Mr Bates and Ms Little to supplement on the detail of this, if that is okay.

Mr BATES: Mr Limbrick, I might just go back to your questions about what it is. We are not building software from scratch. We are using a number of multinational global brands which we are knitting together. There is a core database system. We have got master data management, which we are using—cutting-edge, state-of-the-art—after advice from Gartner and other international firms on which are the best ones. So a lot of the build stuff this year is really knitting all those pieces together, together with analytics and presentation layers for the users. Deputy Secretary Little can probably better explain the ongoing funding between how much is the running cost of system. As you say, a lot of it is web based, so it is an annual fee. That is why the capital amounts are much smaller than your traditional IT budgets, but there is a lot for supervision of the system and training of staff. We have built in two-factor authentication so that we will never have issues where people leave their employment and can still access the systems. We are building all of that at the moment. But I might as ask Deputy Secretary Little to talk a bit more about the ongoing arrangements.

Ms LITTLE: Yes. Thank you very much. I think that is an excellent summary. So effectively, as my colleague has said, there are costs with web-based, cloud-based, systems in terms of maintaining them. That is why the asset costs are comparatively low. But in addition to that, we take very seriously the obligation to train and support and monitor the users of the system. So, for example, maternal and child health nurses will be able to access the system, people who are child protection workers will be able to access the system and welfare officers at schools will be able to access the system, and we do need to ensure that before any user accesses the Child Link system they are appropriately trained and supported. We need to support the authorised users in each of those settings. We also do need to ensure that we have that back-of-office function in terms of the maintenance of the register and the onboarding and offboarding processes which my colleague has referred to. So it is all those things together in terms of the proper operation of this system. Of course there are costs

associated when you, in the way that my colleagues described, start to collate data together from different existing government systems in order to form a picture of a particular child, including their vulnerabilities. But IT systems require all of that human capital sitting around them and all of those good processes and supports in order to deliver their benefits and to mitigate against any risks, as we described.

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you. Mr Bates, I wonder if I could just ask a couple more questions. Firstly, what is the company that you are partnering with to do this? And secondly, you mentioned the master data management. I have been involved in lots of master data management projects, and one of the big problems with them is mismatching data between multiple systems. How are you going to ensure that this is managed to a degree where you do not get mismatches, because I know that that could be a very, very serious risk with a project like this, couldn't it, if you get some information attributed to the wrong child or something or if the master data management fails. How are you going to ensure that does not happen?

Mr BATES: Again, I might ask Deputy Secretary Little, who is probably closer to the QA side of the process.

Ms LITTLE: So this project has been developed over the last three years, including this year, and there was a proof-of-concept phase and a pilot phase and now we are moving into the later phases of the work. And one of the things that was a special focus of the early stages of the work was precisely the issue that you are raising: how do you ensure that you have enough data from the various systems that are held by, say, DET, the Department of Health and DFFH to ensure that this David Limbrick is the same as this David Limbrick over here? So there has been really sustained and very detailed work done with experts on precisely those things to ensure there are enough matching data points to be able to get accurate profiles to be displayed about the one child.

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. That concludes the time we have set aside for consideration of the early childhood portfolio this morning. We thank you all for appearing before the committee in this capacity today. 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 workplace safety portfolio with the minister.

Witnesses withdrew.