

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Budget estimates 2020-21 (Donnellan)

Melbourne—Tuesday, 15 December 2020

MEMBERS

Ms Lizzie Blandthorn—Chair

Mr Richard Riordan—Deputy Chair

Mr Sam Hibbins

Mr David Limbrick

Mr Gary Maas

Mr Danny O'Brien

Ms Pauline Richards

Mr Tim Richardson

Ms Nina Taylor

Ms Bridget Vallence

WITNESSES

Mr Luke Donnellan, MP, Minister for Child Protection,

Mr Ben Rimmer, Associate Secretary; Deputy Secretary, Housing; Chief Executive Officer, Homes Victoria,

Mr Chris Asquini, Deputy Secretary, Community Services Operations,

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

Mr Greg Stenton, Deputy Secretary, Corporate Services, and

Ms Simone Corin, Executive Director, Quality, Improvement and System Reform, Department of Health and Human Services.

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 2020–21 Budget Estimates. Its aim is to scrutinise public administration and finance to improve outcomes for the Victorian community.

Note that witnesses and members may remove their masks when speaking to the committee but should replace them afterwards.

All mobile telephones 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.

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.

We welcome Minister Donnellan and officers from your department for consideration in the first instance of the child protection portfolio. We invite you to make a 5-minute presentation, and this will be followed by questions from the committee. Thank you.

Visual presentation.

Mr DONNELLAN: Thank you, Chair. For a long time we have spoken about the need for reform in the children and families sector. We have made many improvements already, substantially upscaling the child protection workforce and slashing case loads, supporting programs for Aboriginal self-determination and trialling many new approaches to therapeutic supports. But this year is the year when the reform agenda really takes hold and when the system is transformed. The Andrews Labor government is investing an extra \$1.15 billion over four years through the budget, bringing the total new investment to \$3 billion since we have been elected. This includes four main packages: \$365.4 million to maintain the capacity of the children and family system; \$363.6 million to reform care services to improve the lived experience of children and young people in residential care and also to reduce representation of Aboriginal children in care and continue to support self-determination for Aboriginal Victorians; \$335.4 million to strengthen intensive family preservation and restoration to help support earlier intervention in the children and family system and to improve outcomes for Victorian children and reduce entries into out-of-home care; \$75 million to support young people leaving care, enabling young people to stay with their existing kinship or foster carer up to 21 years of age or to transition to an independent living arrangement. But there is also a further \$9 million for capital upgrades and maintenance for up to 134 care service properties to ensure young people are placed in homes that are modern, comfortable and suited to their needs.

Deb Tsorbaris, the CEO of the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, which is the peak for this portfolio, described it as a once in a generation budget. In her words:

It promotes dignity, safety and fairness for Victorian children, young people, families and their carers—
and—

... is unprecedented in its size and scale and seeks to build a Victoria that is fairer, more equitable ... looks after the people, communities, and organisations that provide support across the state.

It is also important to note that during the pandemic the Victorian government recognised the challenges and the pressures that Victorian families face, which is why we provided additional funding of \$77.5 million for family and placement prevention services and care services to bolster staff, resources and services for vulnerable Victorians.

As you can see, this year we have significantly boosted the capacity of the children and family system: \$106.7 million for an additional 239 child protection practitioners to ensure the child protection workforce is adequately resourced to provide vital support for families in crisis and to keep Victorian children safe and undertake supervised contact support and transport duties. From 2010–11 to 2014–15 the child protection workforce was increased by 12.2 per cent, while from 2014–15 to 2020–21 it has been increased by 68.3 per cent. There is \$122 million for additional home-based care placements to meet increasing demand for carer children who are unable to live safely with their families; \$22.5 million for 48 staff to support the child protection workforce to undergo a range of working with children checks, subpoena and administrative duties; a \$15 million Community Service Organisation Sustainability Fund to provide financial assistance to service providers impacted financially during the coronavirus pandemic.

And we are doing more to support carers too. The 2020–21 budget includes \$9.1 million for the provision of ongoing flexible funding to support permanent carers. The Victorian government is also encouraging Victorians to open their homes to a foster child and will provide \$5.8 million to continue its recruitment campaign undertaken through Fostering Connections. We will continue to focus on early intervention, with \$3.4 million to continue Child First assessments and intake services to perform the critical role in ensuring that families receive the supports and services they require as early as possible.

This year's budget also sees major investment in the reform of care services. To start with, there is \$90.2 million over three years for more targeted care packages. We also recognise the challenges in residential care, and that is why we have funding of \$85.9 million over three years and \$40.9 million for capital investment, which will increase the number of two- and three-bedroom houses for children with complex needs in residential care. Funding of \$15.9 million will expand the successful Keep Embracing Your Success program in residential care. A further \$9 million will establish care hubs to provide wraparound support for children entering residential care for the first time.

The CHAIR: Sorry to interrupt you there, Minister, but the time for the presentation has expired. I will pass the call to Deputy Chair Mr Richard Riordan.

Mr RIORDAN: Thanks very much, Chair. Welcome, Minister and department staff. I would like to turn to budget paper 3, starting from page 238. Minister, in budget paper 3 relating to child protection, can you please tell us how many unallocated cases there are as at the end of November 2020 in Victoria's child protection system, please?

Mr DONNELLAN: Yes, for sure.

Mr RIORDAN: Perhaps just while you are finding that total figure, presumably that will be broken down by region, so can we have it on notice to have it broken down by region? Is that possible?

Mr DONNELLAN: Well, look, I will first find that particular section you are asking about. Child protection—in terms of allocation rates—

Mr RIORDAN: So these are the unallocated—

Mr DONNELLAN: Unallocated, yes. The unallocated rate I think was approximately—I would have to actually check the exact figure. The June figure was 96 per cent allocation rate, so the unallocated rate is obviously 4 per cent.

Mr RIORDAN: So do you have that in the actual number of young people?

Mr DONNELLAN: No, I do not actually have a number, but I will compare it to prior times—

Mr RIORDAN: Could that be provided on notice?

Mr DONNELLAN: where the unallocated rate was over 18 per cent in 2014. So what we have actually done is we have substantially increased the capacity of the child protection system in terms of providing approximately 889 extra child protection officers since we came to government. What that has actually done is reduce the case loads from approximately 17 in 2014–15 to around 14 today. So what we have done is actually put substantial support into the statutory system, so in other words those 889 extra child protection officers have come into the system, so that has substantially increased the allocation rate and reduced the unallocated rate. What actually happens during that period of time for those cases which are unallocated is a senior officer in the child protection system manages those cases and asks other officers to undertake certain tasks.

Mr RIORDAN: That is not my question, Minister. Thanks for that extra bit of detail. Just wanting to confirm: can we have on notice the total number, not in percentage but the total number, and broken down by region, please?

Mr DONNELLAN: I have not got that figure in regions at all.

Mr RIORDAN: No, but we will take it on notice. Presumably you will have it by region.

Mr D O'BRIEN: It has been provided before.

Mr DONNELLAN: By area, but it will not go down in the fine detail probably you are looking for.

Mr RIORDAN: No, I am happy by area, so just the total number and then the total number allocated by region.

Moving on, I refer to budget paper 3 again, page 384. Minister, given the important independent oversight role the Commission for Children and Young People has in relation to child protection, can you confirm the total number of people currently employed by the CCYP?

Mr DONNELLAN: No, but that is an initiative of the Labor government which introduced was in I think 2016, the commissioner for children and youth. As you would be aware, the commissioner has undertaken multiple reports into residential care and the like, which have been very much—

Mr RIORDAN: But you can take that on notice for us?

Mr DONNELLAN: What is that, sorry?

Mr RIORDAN: You can take on notice for us the amount of people currently employed by the commission? Presumably someone will know how many people work there.

Mr DONNELLAN: In terms of funding, it is about \$16 million over four years, which we have just recently allocated. I do not have staff numbers available today but—

Mr RIORDAN: But you can take that on notice?

Mr DONNELLAN: Happy to take that on notice, yes.

Mr RIORDAN: Excellent, thank you. And with the short time we have left, Minister, your government has committed itself, subject to budgetary and policy considerations, to implementing the Victorian Ombudsman's recommendation in her report into complaints about assaults of five children living in child protection residential care units.

The CHAIR: Sorry, Deputy Chair, your time has expired. I will pass the call to Mr Gary Maas, MP.

Mr MAAS: Thanks, Chair, and thanks, Minister and departmental staff, for your appearance. Minister, if I could take you to budget paper 3 at page 67. I would like to focus on the Better Futures: Home Stretch initiative, and I was hoping that you would be able to explain for the committee how the Better Futures: Home Stretch initiative will improve supports for Victorian out-of-home care leavers.

Mr DONNELLAN: I will say that was probably the most exciting thing that came in the budget in terms of Better Futures and Home Stretch in terms of it is now embedded in our service model, so funding is extended well beyond the forward estimates of four years. But each year 500 children approximately 16 to 18 years of

age in residential care, foster care or kinship care have their child protection orders cease for the final time and they leave care. Often that means leaving home, where they had been staying, and starting a challenging road to independence—and, let us be honest, many of them end up in homelessness, unemployment and the like. That is recognised, and it is why we have introduced Better Futures and Home Stretch. This is very much in stark contrast, as we know, to the general population whose family support does not expire obviously on their 18th birthday, with many people remaining in the family home as they embark on their first years of adulthood. Leaving home is hard enough for people at 18 years of age, let alone those who have obviously suffered trauma through their childhood.

On pretty much my first day in this role I went down to the Collingwood Children's Farm to make an announcement specifically in relation to this. It was actually a trial covering about 50 children. It was interesting because I sort of knew that 50 was not the full gamut of all the children that needed to be covered by this, so it was with a tinge of guilt in a sense, if that makes sense, that we would not be covering the other 450 children who needed that support and that care and that guidance, more than anything else, which is what Home Stretch provides. Look, in many ways it was really a sense that there was work to be done, and that was in my first days. So really this budget has very much brought that home.

What they receive is casework support; access to flexible funding—so, in other words, to purchase items they may need to assist them in work, to assist them in study, to assist them just doing what they need to do; an accommodation and care allowance so young people can remain with the foster or kinship care; and also support, to be honest, in their transition to independent living. This we know will have a significant impact in terms of even though it is a latter intervention, it is part of our early intervention to recognise that far too many of these young people end up in the justice system and there is a need to intervene to provide them with guidance and support to actually ensure they have a better chance of success. That is very much why we have introduced that Better Futures program—to provide that support, the care, the love and the guidance, more than anything else, they need.

For our Indigenous community kids, for them it will obviously be very much about supporting them to engage with their culture and their community because that is just so vital, and we know that that will obviously be done with the support of the Aboriginal community controlled organisations doing that work. I guess the response, more than anything else, to the budget from the community sector was very much focused on that Better Futures and Home Stretch. If I look at what Paul McDonald, CEO of Anglicare, said:

The most single significant reform in child welfare in a generation ... Life saving and life changing for young people in care ...

And he and others are very much, I guess, the hustlers in the community sector, so really pushed us as a government to actually recognise that that was where we needed to intervene—in that stage. Better Futures starts at 15 years and nine months—intervenes then—and then obviously Home Stretch is from 18 years onwards, as I have indicated. But it is vital that we recognise that they need support, they need guidance, and that is why we have introduced the Better Futures program.

Mr MAAS: Terrific. I will leave it there. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Maas. I will pass to Mr Sam Hibbins, MP.

Mr HIBBINS: Thanks, Chair. Thank you, Minister and your team, for appearing this evening. I want to ask about the government's response to the recent Ombudsman's report into the *Investigation into Complaints about Assaults of Five Children Living in Child Protection Residential Care Units* and the issue that the Ombudsman raised in terms of wider issues, where the Ombudsman has said:

Evidence shows the experiences of the five children are not new or isolated. Over the last decade, many oversight bodies have warned of significant and systemic problems with the residential care system—this office, the Victorian Auditor-General's Office, the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, the Institute of Child Protection Studies and the Victorian Commission for Children and Young People ...

And one of the findings was that:

Child Protection representatives and the Department spoke of a stretched system in which Child Protection workers are forced to make 'least-worse' decisions for children. Placement decisions were dictated by the availability of beds, rather than children's best interests.

So I ask, probably more out of a sense of exasperation than anything: when is this going to end? Are we going to have another report next year that says the same thing, the same issues? I appreciate the initiatives and the announcements you have made in the budget, but the question is: when is this going to end?

Mr DONNELLAN: Thank you for the question, Member for Prahran. Obviously it is something that I very much welcome, those reports, because they highlight where we need to do better—there is no doubt about that. Any loss of life due to suicide or the like—or abuse or any experience like that—is just tragic, to put it mildly. Obviously the Ombudsman highlighted various issues, as you indicated. We have accepted those recommendations, and the department is actually also specifically focused on those who remain in care in terms of providing better wraparound support.

Obviously, as we indicated in the budget, there were various issues in terms of, you talked about, placement. The budget provides that we will be putting \$40.9 million of additional investment into the development of 21 two- and three-bedroom residential facilities, which is very much relevant to recommendation 1, as you highlighted, and \$90.2 million for targeted care packages across the system to provide tailored and individual support and their carers, preventing them from entering residential care—so to stop actually having children enter residential care in the first place to try and provide stability to the existing placement, whether it be with a foster or kinship carer, so trying to literally keep kids out of residential care.

There is also, obviously, funding that we put forward in terms of the road map to reform to recognise that there needs to be greater wraparound services for kids in residential care, including the KEYS program, which I was talking about a minute ago, and Home Stretch but also a further \$9 million to establish care hubs to provide wraparound support for children entering residential care for the first time as well as sibling groups. That is part of also broadening that accommodation offering, so if we have two or three children in the same family we can actually put them in the same household. But obviously—

Mr HIBBINS: Can I just go into a bit of detail about the two- and three-bedroom residential facilities? How many will be two-bedroom and how many will be three-bedroom, and what will then the make-up of residential units be in the state? What will be the figures remaining for four-bedroom and other units?

Mr DONNELLAN: I missed that. What would be the what, sorry?

Mr HIBBINS: If you are having 21 two- and three-bed units, what will then be the overall figures for the state in terms of residential units?

Mr DONNELLAN: I am not sure I have got the figures in terms of the total numbers of residential units, but it is both a leasing package, to lease more two- and three-bedroom units, and also to construct more two- or three-bedroom units. In terms of the total numbers of residential, we have got 450 children approximately in residential care, so I would assume we have got—

Mr HIBBINS: You can take it on notice as we are running out of time.

Mr DONNELLAN: approximately 450 beds. I would have to—

Mr HIBBINS: Take that on notice—the number of two-bedroom, three-bedroom, four-bedroom and any other. That would be of benefit to the committee—great, thanks.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Hibbins. Mr Danny O'Brien has the call.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Thanks, Chair. Good evening, Minister. Minister, can I just ask you to pull your microphone down a bit towards your mouth?

Mr DONNELLAN: I am not talking clearly, enunciating clearly? No?

Mr D O'BRIEN: I would never accuse you of that.

Mr DONNELLAN: Well, I can't hear properly anyway.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Minister, just following on from Mr Hibbins's questions actually, about the Ombudsman's report, and I understand the government has committed itself to accepting the recommendations, subject to budgetary and policy considerations—

Mr DONNELLAN: Yes.

Mr D O'BRIEN: The second recommendation on page 14 is for an expansion of the commissioner's functions to include an independent children's advocacy function. I am just wondering if you can tell me on page 63, the output initiatives of budget paper 3, which one is funding that new independent children's advocacy function.

Mr DONNELLAN: There is nothing in the budget papers of that. We have not addressed that issue at this stage, that recommendation.

Mr D O'BRIEN: So it is not funded in this year's budget?

Mr DONNELLAN: No.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Do you have any time line as to when you intend to implement it?

Mr DONNELLAN: Obviously with a lot of these it is subject to budgetary considerations, and to be honest the quantum in terms of what we have put in this year addresses many of these issues. I will say obviously that is one that is not being addressed, but in terms of infrastructure and numbers of child protection officers and the like, training up better for residential care and the like, that has all started, but that is one we have not addressed at this stage.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Is it something the government is committed to implementing, and if so, when?

Mr DONNELLAN: Look, it is something we would be keen to implement. We have accepted it in principle, but we are still to do work to implement it.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Can I ask perhaps whether the department has costed what it might be—what the cost might be—and if so, in the biggest spending budget in the state's history, how it did not get prioritised?

Mr DONNELLAN: I am not sure the department has done costings for that yet.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Okay. Minister, this is probably a speculative question, but we have heard of a child that actually had to be put into a quarantine hotel because of a lack of emergency accommodation. Are you able to confirm that?

Mr DONNELLAN: No, I cannot confirm that.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Is anyone from the department able to confirm that they have heard of that situation?

Mr DONNELLAN: Look, for argument's sake, in terms of our response to various things, in terms of the department of housing, in terms of North Melbourne, there was one child protection client there just from memory. There were some clients moved out—

Mr D O'BRIEN: From the public housing towers, you mean?

Mr DONNELLAN: Yes, sorry, the public housing towers.

Ms ASQUINI: Mr O'Brien, we have established a particular care facility to support any child or young person, or sibling group if necessary, with COVID or COVID-like symptoms. I do not have anything that immediately comes to mind with regard to quarantine hotels.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Sorry, is that children who might go into, say, a Hotels for Heroes-type situation where they need to be isolated? Is that what you are talking about?

Ms ASQUINI: Yes, so if we are involved with a child or their family and they are not able to safely remain isolated and supported within the home or in fact because we are concerned about their safety and we need to have them placed, we have established a particular facility to support those arrangements.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Okay, but it has not been used?

Ms ASQUINI: Yes, it has been used. It has been used a couple of times. I would have to go back and check, Mr O'Brien. I think certainly for children who have had COVID-like symptoms—I am not sure whether anybody tested positive that we have placed in that facility, but certainly, as I said, for COVID-like symptoms we have used it.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Okay. If I could quickly just go to the commissioner's *In Our Own Words* report in relation to the lived experience of children in out-of-home care. Again, the government accepted all the recommendations in principle, but the CCYP has indicated it is yet to receive an implementation plan from the government. Again I cannot see where that is in the budget papers. Can you enlighten me, Minister?

Mr DONNELLAN: Well, I will say the CCYP said she felt heartened by the budget. The budget has a real focus on doing it tough, and in relation to Home Stretch and Better Futures the commissioner said:

This. Is. Brilliant ... suffice to say this expansion of support to all care leavers who need it is absolutely needed. Well done!

The CHAIR: Sorry to interrupt, Minister, but the member's time has expired. I will pass the call to Ms Pauline Richards, MP.

Ms RICHARDS: Thank you, Minister, and thank you, officials, for appearing and for your service this year. I wanted to take you back to budget paper 3, page 67, and the Home Stretch program you were discussing with Mr Maas earlier. I am interested in having an understanding of the Better Futures program and particularly the role of Better Futures workers in that program.

Mr DONNELLAN: Well, it is a hard job, no doubt about that. The people that do that work are marvellous people who have got enormous care and love and are really there to support the care leavers and very much try to prepare them and plan before they get to the stage where they must be independent. From the age of 15 years and nine months children in care can access support from the local Better Futures workers. It aims to engage early with care leavers, supporting them to have an active voice in their transition planning and providing individualised support across a range of life areas including housing, education, employment and community and cultural connections.

The support available through the Better Futures program is provided in the context of a young person's current care status, either when the young person is in care or when the person has left care, so they can reaccess that even if they have left care. When a young person is in care and still some time away from transitioning to independence it is likely that the primary role of Better Futures will be to provide secondary consultation to case managers and care teams. The Better Futures care worker does not assume lead responsibility for casework support whilst the young person is subject to statutory care. Support from the care worker will gradually increase as the young person prepares to transition from care, usually from about six months prior.

The Better Futures worker will provide young people with casework support, information and advice to assist them with access to flexible funding. They will assist the young person to achieve any goals relating to transitioning out of home. They can support young people to engage or re-engage in education, training and employment. And they will also help them with life skills if it is needed and requested, including how to manage administrative tasks in life, because of course a lot of these young people have not had the same experience with their parents that we have had. They will support young people in linking them to community connections when a young person might be at risk of social isolation upon leaving care. And they will also assist a care leaver with the important task of finding appropriate housing as they leave care, and we know that so many end up homeless.

Combined with the Andrews government's unprecedented \$5.3 billion investment in social housing, these supports will ensure the most vulnerable young Victorians have the best chance of thriving as they enter adulthood. So it is really about what, in many times, a parent would provide, but they are simply not there to provide any of that guidance. So that is very much what a Better Futures care worker would undertake.

Ms RICHARDS: Thank you, Minister. I now refer you to budget paper 3, page 63. I am just interested in understanding how the reforming care services program will improve the lived experience of children and young people in residential care.

Mr DONNELLAN: Look, as I was saying earlier, I estimated about 450, but it was actually 453 children in residential care on any one day across the 2018–19 financial year. Residential care is usually provided to up to four children, usually 12 years of age or older, by carers working shifts with homes in the community. With the number of children in out-of-home care growing as the population grows, our residential placements available have remained stable. It is for these reasons that we have needed to very much, in this budget, deal with that and to provide greater options and flexibility for placing children into appropriate residential care.

We have invested \$85.9 million over three years and \$49.9 million for capital investment to increase the number of two- and three-bedroom units, as I was saying. That is about trying to have greater flexibility so that when you have got traumatised kids—and they have all been through trauma, to put it mildly—you are not putting children potentially who may conflict with one another and provide an unsafe environment for other children together. So it is really about trying to provide us with better options and better placements for children so that we can actually better fit and get a better outcome there. So we are going to be building 25 of the new two- and three-bedroom units. It will also allow for maintenance and minor capital upgrades of the 134 existing residential care facilities that we have. It also provides increased support for those children, obviously through Better Futures, but there is also—

The CHAIR: Sorry to cut you off there, Minister, but the time has expired. I will pass the call to Mr David Limbrick, MLC.

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you, Chair. And thank you, Minister and team, for appearing today. I wanted to ask a question about budget paper 3, page 239, which gives an indication of the number of Child First assessments and interventions. It states that it significantly overshot the target—about double—and yet the 2018–19 figures were sort of similar to the 2019–20 figures. Why was the target set for 2020–21 to be exactly the same as last year? Wouldn't it make sense to increase that target?

Mr DONNELLAN: I think to some extent it was recognising that there were greater pressures this year on families and the like and in many ways looking to try and divert families earlier, so using Child First assessments to actually assess what a family would require in terms of support, whether for drug and alcohol, whether it be therapeutic interventions of some type. Really Child First is about in many ways trying to keep families out of the system—keeping the children with the family and not having them entering the system. This year, obviously with COVID-19, has been particularly straining for many, many families who may not have experienced similar strain previously. So in many ways child protection and others have made assessments that there may not be a reason to intervene this year and take statutory management of a child over but to look at using Child First to get these families support in those areas to, I guess, provide them with skills to be better parents during an incredibly stressful period. So I am actually quite positive about that in the sense that, yes, we are over the estimate of what we were going to be, no doubt about that, but we probably, to be honest, did not expect this year what—

Mr LIMBRICK: But that goes to my question, though. Why didn't the 2020–21 target increase if we were expecting, you know—

Mr DONNELLAN: The estimate would have been undertaken based on the fact that we would be expecting, as we were opening up—this is my guess—that we would not have similar pressures that were existing this year in terms of being at home the whole time and the like, so it is hopeful that we do not go through a similar year, really, I guess.

Mr LIMBRICK: Okay. Thank you. And in slide 7 of the presentation there is \$269 million for the family preservation and restoration program. Now, I recall when the recent omnibus bill went through Parliament one of the things in there that we looked into in detail was around extending the time lines for family reunifications. Now, the fact that that was necessary to put in the omnibus bill would seem to indicate that this process of reunification was severely impacted by the pandemic. I imagine some of this money would be towards trying to fix that situation. What is the current status of that? Like, those reunifications, are they all back on track now or are they still interrupted by the pandemic?

Mr DONNELLAN: It will take time to get them back on track, but that is why we have actually in the omnibus bill put that through, to allow families to undertake that work—it may be drug and alcohol, whatever—in terms of the intervention, to assist them to actually meet the conditions for the reunification. So in other words, it recognises that during this period it has been very hard to do a lot of that. We have extended the time line so we still give the families the opportunity to have the reunification, recognising that a lot of the services will be very difficult to deliver during this period of time.

Mr LIMBRICK: Yes. When we looked into this, you know, drug and alcohol, rehabilitation services and this sort of thing—are those support services that are required for a reunification back online now?

Mr DONNELLAN: Yes, but it will take time to catch that up, no doubt about that. That is why we, to be blunt, recognised reality—that it is just a lot harder this year to deliver such services. Some of them can be done online, but a lot of them cannot be done online.

Mr LIMBRICK: And what other services are we talking about that are required for this reunification?

Mr DONNELLAN: Mental health services. The funding is flexible many times, so it depends on the family. It might be drug and alcohol, it might be mental health—broadly in that range. How do we provide a parent with better skills to care for their kid, recognising that if someone has got severe mental illness they need support in that space to actually be able to support their child. So it is about a suite of human services and trying to wrap them around a family to get them into better shape to be better parents, to put it simply and crudely.

Mr LIMBRICK: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. I will pass the call to Mr Tim Richardson, MP.

Mr RICHARDSON: Thank you, Chair. Minister, can I take you to the topic of care hubs. In budget paper 3 at page 70 in the initiatives description it mentions the establishment of care hubs to help younger people move to long-term placements. Are you able to explain for the committee's benefit a bit about these care hubs and what they are?

Mr DONNELLAN: Well, care hubs are, to put it simply and crudely, an intensive sort of intervention to try and keep people out of care, if that makes sense—or for those entering care for the first time, to try and support them while they are entering care but with an intent to have them potentially reunified with the carer or the parent. So we have provided \$9.1 million over two years to trial the care hubs to provide intensive support to children and young people entering care before moving to longer term placements. So in other words it is about trying to get them out of residential care. Care hubs will initially target specific cohorts: those children and young people who entered care in large sibling groups, children and young people entering care for the first time or young people at risk of entering residential care. Care hubs will provide improved assessment and placement planning to enable better placement matching and care stability, and obviously better placement matching is dependent also upon improving the stock of our residential care as well. This may include stabilisation of a young person's current home environment in order for them to return to their current home-based placement or reunification with the family. When it is not possible for a young person to go into an alternative home-based setting or be reunified, care hubs allow for planned and supported entering into therapeutic residential care or into intensive specialty services, including mental health and drug and alcohol services. The model includes outreach support post the child or young person's stay in the care hub.

Care hubs very much bring together intensive specialty services and immediate quality placement options. Care hubs are networks or clusters of services and supports that can be shared across the local network. Funding will enable a community service organisation to lead and coordinate the operation of care hub service offerings, which includes placement coordination, alcohol and drug respite, and mental health, family support, outreach and cultural support services. The care hub model of care includes the following elements: a strong focus on planning and pathway creation for children and young people; a dedicated foster care household to support and keep siblings together; a short-term residential care house; a short-term foster care house; a range of specialist services, including mental health workers, family-focused work and cultural supports; access to care and continuity-of-service responses for children in their new stable home-based care or therapeutic residential care placements; and testing and implementation of an outcomes-based case management approach.

So it is, again, all part of either trying to keep the family together, keep the child with their existing carer or, in the longer term, potentially having them in residential care for a short period of time with the intention to keep them out.

Mr RICHARDSON: Thank you, Minister. I want to take you to an element of your presentation where you mentioned the expansion of targeted care packages as part of the reform of care services program. I am wondering, for the committee's benefit, if you could please explain what those targeted care packages are.

Mr DONNELLAN: Again, they are flexible packages. They provide sort of that individualised response to supporting young people and their carers. So it is in many ways about flexibility, because obviously every child, and every carer, is different. But they can support young people in placement through client expenses funding to enable tailored service responses to address the unique needs of children and young people; allocation of key work to support the management coordination of supports and identify needs early; accommodation, including house renovations, extensions and rental payments to enable carers to support children at home and remove barriers to caring; therapeutic supports for children and young people in care to address trauma, antisocial behaviour and behaviours of concern; respite for carers to enable them to continue their caring role; counselling support for both carers and children and young people in care; and training for carers to develop their capacity and capability to better support children and young people in care and respite for their needs. So it is very broad, and deliberately broad, because every child is different, and you know, every carer needs different supports to help them care for that child. So that is why we have sort of called them very much targeted but flexible care packages.

Mr RICHARDSON: Thanks, Minister. I will leave it there. My time is just about to conclude.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Richardson. I will pass the call to Ms Bridget Vallence, MP.

Ms VALLENCE: Thank you, Minister. Minister, in relation to the Commission for Children and Young People's report *In Our Own Words*, is there a budget allocation in the 2020–21 budget for the implementation of the recommendations of this report?

Mr DONNELLAN: Look, a lot of the budget is actually addressing a lot of those issues directly—so I will just grab my section on that.

Ms VALLENCE: Would one of your officials perhaps have the budget allocation?

Mr DONNELLAN: Yes. Look, it is not about one recommendation, because to be honest the commissioner has had I think to date nine inquiries directly into services provided and funded by the department of health, the most recent obviously being *Lost, Not Forgotten* and *In Our Own Words*. We have obviously implemented multiple of these, including the Home Stretch, which was recognising that children at 18 years of age were not ready to leave home and far too many of them end up homeless, unemployed and in the youth justice system. So that is why we introduced Home Stretch—that is over four years—to make that a universal program, extending that, as I was saying, from 18 to 21 years of age, and Better Futures, to actually provide better guidance.

We have obviously also funded \$335 million over four years for a new intensive family preservation and reunification response model—so in other words, recognising that there are issues in residential care. It is about trying to keep children out of residential care, recognising—

Ms VALLENCE: So just to clarify: I appreciate all of those are in the budget, but is there just one specific section in the budget that we can point to for the recommendations?

Mr DONNELLAN: No, no. It is broader than that—

Ms VALLENCE: Okay.

Mr DONNELLAN: because there is a multiplicity of issues that we have identified, but there is not one section which says 'Responses to commissioner's report, and this is the budget item', no.

Ms VALLENCE: That was the question, yes: was there one section which referred to implementation. In the Commission for Children and Young People's recently tabled *Keep Caring* report, the commission found

that a majority of young people in out-of-home care, including young people from vulnerable and disadvantaged groups, did not have leaving care plans as required by DHHS. Certain sections of the report expose administrative failures, including the CRIS database, high workloads of staff, frequent staff turnover, lack of capability and training and poor oversight of leaving care planning. Is there an output initiative in the budget which will address these specific worrying barriers?

Mr DONNELLAN: Well, obviously in relation to not enough information sharing we have put information-sharing legislation through the house to deal with agencies and the like and community service organisations, allowing greater capacity to share information between different entities, including the police, to ensure that they can share that information. In terms of staff pressures, obviously we have increased the staffing numbers and reduced the unallocated rate substantially since we came to government, so that is in a sense about dealing with the issue of the staff pressures. There is obviously extensive work we are doing in terms of supporting child protection officers in terms of welfare and the like, and in terms also of risk assessment and training, which is also contained in the budget.

So yes, over a period of time—including the fact that we have introduced training for residential care workers in terms that they have to be qualified in that space, they have to have an overnight safety plan—it has been a continuum of budget outcomes, in a sense, that have addressed the I think nine inquiries I was thinking from memory that the commissioner has done to date. But also separately to that I have set up my own ministerial youth advisory group, who provide me with unfiltered experiences of their times in out-of-home care, and that is very useful to me because a lot of it reflects what the commissioner has actually identified—you know, multiple placements—

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. I will pass on to Ms Nina Taylor, MLC.

Ms TAYLOR: Thank you. I note that in your presentation you reference programs specifically funded to address and to continue to reduce the over-representation of Aboriginal children in care. Can you please provide further information about these programs?

Mr DONNELLAN: Yes, look, I think it is—and this is just going from memory, so I might have this wrong—about a fifth to one in four children in out-of-home care. I think it is approximately that—

Mr ALISANDRATOS: Twenty-five per cent.

Mr DONNELLAN: Twenty-five per cent—sorry, I just wanted to make sure I was broadly in the right area—which is awful, which is far too high. So what we have introduced is part of Aboriginal Children in Aboriginal Care, but it goes under I guess the policy Wungurilwil Gapgapduir—that is one of the first words I learned when I got into this role, because I thought, ‘I don’t want to mumble over that one and get that one wrong’. But it is very much about moving the management and care of Aboriginal children to Aboriginal community-controlled organisations. That recognises that in many ways if you are not connected to your culture and your country, you are lost, and that is why in many ways we have that over-representation. Basically the colonisation, the trauma and all that—the generational trauma which is passed on—is why we have unfortunately so many Indigenous children in care.

But there are a couple of things. As I was saying a minute ago, Wungurilwil Gapgapduir is an agreement, and that is oversighted by the Aboriginal Children’s Forum. It is made up of ACCOs, CSOs and members of the department, and we meet throughout the year. It was only last Thursday that again we met. It is very much about working together with community service organisations, the department and Aboriginal-community controlled organisations to over time transition all the children in statutory care to Aboriginal community-controlled organisations. What we are finding is broadly that with the management of Aboriginal children by ACCOs—I will call them that just to keep it simple—we are getting better rates of family reunification and we are getting better outcomes.

Now, I will say in terms of the number of children overall that we take into care we are the lowest in the country—six per thousand; I think the average across the country is eight per thousand—but that being said, we have far too many Aboriginal children in the statutory child protection system. So in this budget we have allocated \$85.5 million in programs that will give Aboriginal committees and Aboriginal community-controlled organisations greater control over decisions and resources for Aboriginal children in care, and we are supporting more Aboriginal children with culturally appropriate care. This includes \$29.9 million over four

years to continue the case management for Aboriginal children on child protection orders in care to transition from the department and community service organisations to ACCOs. This includes 433 kinship care targets funded in the 2018–19 budget as well as an additional 200 kinship care targets first funded in the 2019–20 budget. The transition is an important step in achieving the government’s commitment to self-determination and self-management for Aboriginal communities by providing access to culturally appropriate supports and services. In turn we were seeing, as I was saying a little bit earlier, family reunifications rates higher when the management of those children is under ACCOs—I will keep it simple. At the end of June 2020, 49 per cent, or 791 children, of Aboriginal children in care were case managed by ACCOs. I want to see that number continue to rise, and this funding will help to do exactly that.

The budget also funds \$44.2 million to continue and then grow and expand the nation’s first Aboriginal Children in Aboriginal Care program. It is a co-designed model of Aboriginal care. I will be honest: if you do not design services with those the services are intended for, you will never get the design right. You will always get it wrong. You do not do it to people; you work with people to get those outcomes, and that is very much what we have done here. The ACAC program—it is Aboriginal Children in Aboriginal Care—was allowed to come into play through—

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. Sorry, Ms Taylor. The time for consideration of this portfolio has concluded. We thank you very much for appearing before the committee in this capacity today, Minister, and your officials. 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. We will take a short break now before moving to consideration of the ageing, carers and disability portfolio with you shortly. Thank you, Minister.

Witnesses withdrew.