

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the 2024–25 Budget Estimates

Melbourne – Friday 24 May 2024

MEMBERS

Sarah Connolly – Chair

Nicholas McGowan – Deputy Chair

Michael Galea

Mathew Hilakari

Lauren Kathage

Bev McArthur

Danny O’Brien

Aiv Puglielli

Meng Heang Tak

**Necessary corrections to be notified to
executive officer of committee**

WITNESSES

Enver Erdogan MLC, Minister for Youth Justice; and

Kate Houghton, Secretary,

Jodi Henderson, Deputy Secretary, Youth Justice,

Andrea Davidson, Commissioner, Youth Justice, Department of Justice and Community Safety.

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

I ask that mobile telephones please be turned to silent.

On behalf of the Parliament, the committee is conducting this Inquiry into the 2024–25 Budget Estimates. The committee's aim is to scrutinise public administration and finance to improve outcomes for the Victorian community.

I advise that all evidence taken by the committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. However, comments repeated outside of this hearing may not be protected by this privilege.

As Chair I expect that committee members will be respectful towards witnesses, the Victorian community joining the hearing via the live stream this afternoon and other committee members.

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

I welcome the Minister for Youth Justice the Honourable Enver Erdogan, as well as officials from DJCS. Minister, I am going to invite you to make an opening statement or presentation of no more than 5 minutes, after which time committee members will start their questions. Your time starts now.

Enver ERDOGAN: Thank you, Chair. I might begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we are meeting. I pay my respects to their elders past, present and emerging.

Visual presentation.

Enver ERDOGAN: I would like to start by looking at our system overview, if I may. You will see on the first slide a bit of a system overview of what we do. Youth justice is responsible for the statutory supervision of children and young people. Our youth justice system is a nation-leading system that improves community safety while offering opportunities for young people to turn their lives around. The government has invested more than \$2 billion since getting into government in 2014 to deliver a modern, fit-for-purpose youth justice system. We are seeing positive results, with outcomes that lead the nation. We continue to have the lowest rate of young people in custody and one of the lowest rates of Aboriginal young people under supervision in the nation. We know, based on expert evidence, that the best outcome is to divert young people away from the justice system and antisocial behaviours, and that approach is working for the vast majority of young people. That is thanks to investments we are making not only in my youth justice portfolio but more broadly across the whole of government.

The 2024–25 budget invests \$69.2 million to continue the work that has been done over recent years to maintain vital services and deliver critical reforms, keeping our community safe. That includes \$34.8 million to ensure safe and stable custodial facilities and community services and to deliver dedicated and tailored responses to youth offending, and \$34.4 million to develop a trial of electronic monitoring and enhanced bail supervision and support to respond to a small cohort of high-risk young people who engage in serious and repeat offending. We are continuing to invest in a modern and effective youth justice system that supports our hardworking staff and provides young people with the best chance to turn their lives around.

The 2024–25 budget invests \$34.8 million to support a range of programs and initiatives to prevent people entering the justice system and provide those who do with the best opportunities to turn their lives around. This includes the continuation of behaviour support specialists in custody, which aims to help address the root cause

of offending behaviour, and disability support for young people with diagnosed disabilities. This is particularly important given statistics tell us young people who come into contact with the youth justice system are more than likely to have some form of disability. There is \$3.6 million to continue a dedicated legal service for Aboriginal young people designed to provide specialist culturally responsive legal services to provide access to justice and help close the gap.

I would like to turn now to our efforts to reduce the number of young people in the justice system and prevent reoffending. As you can see from the slide, Victoria's youth justice system is leading the nation – you will see from the table. The latest Australian Institute of Health and Welfare report on youth justice shows that in 2022–23 Victoria had the lowest rate of young people aged 10 to 17 under community supervision in Australia. To provide a direct comparison, New South Wales is sitting at a rate of 11 per 10,000 young people compared to Victoria at 4.7 per 10,000. Victoria also has the lowest custodial rate at 1.1 young people per 10,000, aged 10 to 17, less than half the national rate of 2.7. Victoria also has the highest proportion of community orders successfully completed at 94.5 per cent. These results are the product of the government's sustained reform and investment in the youth justice system since 2014. I am pleased by these figures, but there is always more work to do.

While Victoria has one of the lowest rates of youth offending, we note that there is a small cohort of young people that are engaged in serious and repeat offending. This budget invests \$34.4 million to help establish a two-year trial of electronic monitoring and enhanced bail supervision. It will allow bail decision-makers, including courts, to order electronic monitoring of a young person. This is about more than just electronic monitoring devices; this trial has several complementary elements designed to address problematic behaviours and improve community safety. The trial includes more resources to monitor compliance with bail conditions, such as curfews, and to allow for responses and includes more resources to support case managers to work proactively with families, schools and community service providers to address the causes of offending and get young people on a better path. This is about giving courts and youth justice additional tools to address identified risks and to keep the community safe. If a young person poses an unacceptable risk to community safety, they should not be out in the community, with or without electronic monitoring.

Victoria has a lot to be proud of. I want to thank each of you for your attention. I look forward to your questions.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, Minister. The first 7 minutes goes to Mr O'Brien.

Danny O'BRIEN: Thank you, Chair, and good afternoon, Minister and team. Minister, BP3, page 152, indicates a 13.5 per cent cut in the youth justice custodial services line item for the budget. What programs or services are being cut to make this saving?

Enver ERDOGAN: I think it is important to understand that what has happened in our youth justice custodial services is that in the last year we have closed one of our facilities, so we have gone from three facilities to two. There was an overlap of financial years because our Malmsbury facility – and again I want to thank the people of Malmsbury and at that facility, who served our state so well for so long – had come to the end of its useful life. With our new state-of-the-art facility at Cherry Creek there was an opportunity for us to close the ageing infrastructure and make use of the new facilities. I think that is an important distinction to make when we talk about that figure.

Danny O'BRIEN: How long were Malmsbury and Cherry Creek both being operated at the same time?

Enver ERDOGAN: With Cherry Creek we had the first cohort around September last year, and the last cohort left Malmsbury around Christmas time at the end of last year. So there was a crossover of about maybe three months. Commissioner, you might be able to elaborate on those timeframes.

Andrea DAVIDSON: That is correct, Minister.

Danny O'BRIEN: I would query then, Minister, whether that covers the \$35 million and 13 per cent cut to the budget. Are there any other programs that are cut in the budget as a result?

Enver ERDOGAN: Broadly speaking, as I alluded to in my opening statements, we do have the lowest number of young people in custody, so obviously there are savings that can be made in these circumstances.

They are not obviously utilised at the same rate because there are still economies of scale there, but I think we do have less people in custodial facilities.

Danny O'BRIEN: How many are currently in custody?

Enver ERDOGAN: In terms of the custody numbers, they do fluctuate, but the small numbers – when I announced the opening of Cherry Creek and the closure of Malmsbury last year we had 100; we are now below 90 in custodial facilities.

Danny O'BRIEN: Is there a distinction between 'in custody' and 'on remand'?

Enver ERDOGAN: No. The ones in custody, some are remandees – the majority in the youth system at the last briefing I had were remandees.

Andrea DAVIDSON: Yes.

Enver ERDOGAN: Maybe our Commissioner could elaborate.

Danny O'BRIEN: Do you have a breakdown there, Commissioner?

Andrea DAVIDSON: I can give some specific dates. As at 21 May we had 82 young people in custody, 35 of whom were sentenced and 47 of whom were on remand.

Danny O'BRIEN: Excellent, exactly what I am after. Thank you for being available with the information. Commissioner, given the well-publicised youth crime crisis, did the department put forward a budget bid for additional funding for youth justice?

Andrea DAVIDSON: In terms of tackling youth crime, which is obviously the focus of your question, I think it is really important, Mr O'Brien, to understand that tackling youth crime takes a broad approach and a very dynamic approach. We know that we need to adjust to the cohorts that we are seeing in the community, and as the minister spoke to in his presentation, we know that on the one hand we have the best diversion rates that we have ever had – we have less young people in the system – but we also have a small but persistent cohort of serious youth offenders. Within the budget there are a number of initiatives that are focused both on maintaining the gains that we have made in the youth justice system as well as addressing that emerging cohort of higher tariff offenders.

Danny O'BRIEN: Are you seeing the same people come back in youth justice more than once?

Andrea DAVIDSON: We see some young people return.

Danny O'BRIEN: How many?

Andrea DAVIDSON: Under the ROGS data, it is around a 70 per cent return rate to youth justice supervision, but really importantly, we also have the highest rate of completion of community youth justice supervision. I think those two things go hand in hand and also alongside our high diversion rates. We have had over 1400 young people go through diversion this year, with a 98 per cent success rate against those diversion orders. With the success of diversion comes a more concentrated complexity for that smaller number of young people that we have in the system. That is a really critical point to understanding that 70 per cent. It is a more concentrated cohort, a much smaller cohort.

Danny O'BRIEN: Just to clarify, is that 70 per cent those who have been in youth justice who come back to youth justice or just to the justice system more broadly?

Andrea DAVIDSON: To youth justice, yes.

Danny O'BRIEN: To youth justice, okay.

Enver ERDOGAN: Just to clarify –

Danny O'BRIEN: Minister, could I just ask: have there been any issues identified with the construction of Cherry Creek? In particular is it accurate to say that the height of the walls needs to be increased?

Enver ERDOGAN: I think in terms of its design, like any new build, in the early stages I know there were obviously improvements and defects that were corrected with the contractor within that contractual period, which is quite usual. I know Mr O'Brien, you have been out of government for a little while, but when you commission new facilities –

Danny O'BRIEN: I am not talking about someone putting a door handle on backwards. I am talking about: did the walls have to be increased in height?

Enver ERDOGAN: It is a maximum-security facility, so with the cohort of young people, we have been pretty up-front about it. It is a very complex cohort, of 15- to 18-year-old boys. In terms of the height of the walls during the construction phase, on specifics the Commissioner may be able to elaborate.

Andrea DAVIDSON: I can confirm there has been no increase to the height of the walls, and we are certainly very happy with the security that the facility has been able to offer us. Opening any new facility, particularly with young people – young people will test the facility, and on the whole we have been very happy with how the facility has held up.

Danny O'BRIEN: To that end, have there been instances of youth in custody damaging the facility and removing bits of metal to use as weapons?

Andrea DAVIDSON: There have been instances of property damage, as we have had in all our facilities historically. That is unfortunately a common feature of the complex young people that we manage every day. I would not say that there is a point of difference at Cherry Creek, other than the fact that it is a new precinct and therefore young people have been testing facilities that have not as yet been tested.

Danny O'BRIEN: Okay. Minister, I have not been to Cherry Creek, but as you say, it is new. I understand, though, that people who have said it is very dusty, there are plagues of spiders – generally an unwelcoming nature. Do you believe that Cherry Creek is an environment conducive to people coming out better than they were when they went in?

Enver ERDOGAN: I think that is the goal, and that is why we have designed it that way. I will note when people were visiting the facility it was at a time when there were no young people there. I have been there since the facility has been utilised as well. We have medical health beds. It is set up for intensive treatment, so a mental health focus, intensive treatment focus and vocational training with the Gordon TAFE partnership.

Danny O'BRIEN: I am talking about how it looks and feels.

Enver ERDOGAN: I think it is a maximum-security setting still. I will add that, because it is a complex cohort. So it does have walls; it does look like a prison, to be frank.

Danny O'BRIEN: Thank you.

The CHAIR: The next 7 minutes is going to Mr Galea.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon again, Minister. Commissioner and officials, thank you for joining us to talk about youth justice. I would actually like to pick up from where Mr O'Brien was, with the same budget paper reference, and ask on Cherry Creek. As you have outlined in previous answers, Minister, the Malmsbury centre closed, and Cherry Creek has opened – a new modern facility. I have not personally had the chance to go out there, but I note that Mr McGowan has, I believe. He was quite impressed with it from what I heard too, so I will take his report on note.

Danny O'BRIEN: You're not verballing anyone, are you?

Michael GALEA: Well, he could be here to refute me, but I do not know where he is. I hoped he would be here, actually, and I am not sure if you had the opportunity either, Mr O'Brien. But as I said, I believe Mr McGowan – and I am happy for me him to correct me – did speak quite well of it. I would like to ask you about that, Minister, just in terms of the new facilities being offered at Cherry Creek and if you can update us on the operationalisation of that centre.

Enver ERDOGAN: Thank you. It is a really important question, because it is about the future of our youth justice system and the work we are doing to modernise our facilities. I was proud to open the Cherry Creek youth justice precinct as Minister for Youth Justice last year. It gave us an opportunity to replace the ageing structure at Malmsbury. It is a state-of-the-art facility which is about doing more of what keeps the community safe. As I said, it is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to drive better outcomes, especially because we are focused on a more complex cohort there. It is the result of a more than \$400 million investment that our government has made – heaps of jobs in construction in the west, including trainees and apprentices during the construction of that facility. It is now playing a key role in keeping our community safe and working to rehabilitate young people and children.

It was good, the discussion we just had about ROGS data and the rate of return, because understanding the ROGS data on these issues – there is a lag effect. A lot of the recidivism rates are taken two years later, so I guess we will see the fruits of our Cherry Creek facility in two years time, once we have had a complement. Our goal is to see improvement in results. It is purpose-built and tailored for young people, accommodating small groups of four so staff can be more targeted with individual support in a safe environment. There is a specialised healthcare clinic and also an educational and vocational skills centre. I talked about the partnership with Gordon TAFE. Those out along the Geelong/Lara way will be familiar with Gordon TAFE. There are dedicated cultural and multifaith facilities. I think that is a thing as well. They are in our custodial facilities as well more broadly. We are focused on the fact that, for a lot of young people, connection to faith is important, especially for a lot of the Pasifika boys. We know that connection to faith is important, and we have those services in our settings.

It is not just the physical infrastructure. Cherry Creek is supported by a new workforce model with better pay and conditions and better reflects the focus on rehabilitation. The facility was designed and built on the evidence of international best practice. We try to get the best outcomes for young people upon their release. The development was an important part of really generational reform that is consistent with the Armytage and Ogloff review into our youth justice system. I want to make the point that we were at a different point in time – 2017 – in youth justice in Victoria, and we have certainly made improvements. Again, I want to thank the previous ministers who undertook that important work. I think we wanted to make an assessment of what was working and what was not and also have a better path for our system, and that is why I am proud of the Andrews–Allan government’s \$2 billion investment into our youth justice system and into our facilities.

Michael GALEA: Thanks, Minister. In any sort of undertaking like this it is a big thing to do – opening a new facility such as Cherry Creek. I wonder if you could speak to any challenges that were encountered and how they were dealt with by the department.

Enver ERDOGAN: I think some of that was actually that our Commissioner kindly kind of teased out some of the issues with opening a new facility. For young people in there it can be quite disruptive moving to a new facility, a new environment, but also, in building any large infrastructure project, there are going to be rectification works that need to be done, especially in the early contractual period, and they were done – for example, the changing of doors and handles and all those little issues that you have with those facilities. It was also a new environment for the staff, and I want to thank them as well for the work that they do in our system, because they had to work diligently to ensure that risks were appropriately managed.

Overall, it was a successful operation in transferring the young people from Malmsbury to Cherry Creek. I thank everyone involved, because now we are able to realise the benefits of this space, and in the coming years I look forward to seeing how our data trends are. We did talk about the 70 per cent rate of those returned into our custodial youth justice system, and I am looking forward to seeing not only those in our youth justice system benefit but a broad community benefit with better outcomes for these young people.

Michael GALEA: What sorts of programs are available to young people in Cherry Creek, and, insofar as there can be a typical experience, what would a young person entering that facility typically expect to see with those programs?

Enver ERDOGAN: Thank you, Mr Galea, for that question. We want young people to use their time with us productively – I think that is what is important – so that we can make improvements and address their behaviour and then they can make a much more positive contribution to society upon their release. One of the objectives of Cherry Creek was access to a range of support services; these include education and training,

behaviour support, cultural support, faith support, health and mental health services, targeted offending, rehabilitation and just broad life skills. While we are seeing low numbers in custody we are also seeing the profile of these young people entering custody becoming increasingly complex. So if you take the raw data, we have less people returning to our system, because our system had such low numbers, but this does require a modern, effective youth justice system able to have the capacity to deliver the intensive and specialised care these young people need. In a typical day children and young people are provided with a diverse range of meaningful activities to help build their pro-social skills, which discourage offending. One prime example is the education services: when people enter into custody, they are given tools to prepare themselves for when they exit – more positive contributions to society on the other side of their involvement in youth justice. I am proud to say the strengths of the Cherry Creek facility are in our partnership with Gordon TAFE – it is an important one – to re-engage with education and training, because we know we want them to secure a job upon release. That is an important protective factor.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Minister, and noting we have spoken a lot about Cherry Creek and also about Malmsbury, there is also of course the Parkville centre. Just in relation to how those centres interact, I am wondering if –

The CHAIR: Apologies, Mr Galea. We are going to go back to Mr O'Brien.

Danny O'BRIEN: Thank you, Chair. Commissioner, you were very helpful with those numbers a moment ago. Could I see if you can provide a bit more of a detailed breakdown on where those 82 are with respect to Cherry Creek and Parkville and including the sentenced and on remand – or if you have got it, Minister. It is just the data I am after, that is all.

Enver ERDOGAN: Our Commissioner will have that information.

Andrea DAVIDSON: Sure. Of those 82 in custody, 25 of those are at Cherry Creek and 57 of those are at Parkville.

Danny O'BRIEN: Are you able to give me a breakdown of sentenced versus on remand for the two?

Andrea DAVIDSON: Against the two I do not have that; however, I am happy to take it on notice.

Danny O'BRIEN: Okay. So 26 at Cherry Creek, 56 at Parkville.

Enver ERDOGAN: I think it is important to understand, Mr O'Brien, that some of the 56 at Parkville are part of our dual track. So that was run previously out of Malmsbury, where young people – some of them are over 18. Not necessarily all of these people are under 18 as well – some of them are above 18, and they are doing the dual-track program, which is now run at Parkville. If you take out the dual track, the numbers are more even between the two facilities.

Danny O'BRIEN: Can I confirm, Commissioner, that there are 56 beds at Cherry Creek currently open or available?

Andrea DAVIDSON: There are 56 funded beds plus our eight mental health beds. Further to the minister's comments I think it is really important to acknowledge that Cherry Creek is purpose built for a particular cohort, and that is our 15- to 18-year-old males sentenced and remand. So whilst that in itself is our largest cohort the facility is very much designed fit for the purpose for that cohort. Parkville, of that 56, in addition to the dual track, it is also the facility where we accept all young people, so our full reception cohort. Often young people come in and out of custody relatively quickly, so they do not transition to Cherry Creek, even if they are in that 15- to 18-year-old group, and Parkville is an ideal facility for those young people because it is close to the courts and it is close to the specialist medical facilities, so it is really very much fit for purpose for that reception community. It is also the community site that houses our young women and our younger boys as well, so of that 56 that is a very diverse number of cohorts.

Danny O'BRIEN: Righto. With respect to Cherry Creek, is the 26 the highest it has been there so far?

Andrea DAVIDSON: No, it is not. It has fluctuated. I would have to take the highest number on notice, but it has fluctuated up to approximately 30 to 31.

Danny O'BRIEN: Okay. I note the questionnaire indicates there were 313 full-time equivalent roles at YJ 1 classification and 179 at YJ 2 classification in financial year 2023. The end of this year it is expected to be almost virtually a swap – it will be 375 at YJ 2 and 124 at YJ 1. Is that evidence that you have literally got to pay people more to stay in the youth justice system?

Andrea DAVIDSON: That is a reflection of our uplifted workforce model.

Danny O'BRIEN: Your what?

Andrea DAVIDSON: The uplifted workforce model, which the minister touched on, was an important reform that was implemented alongside Cherry Creek but also has been implemented at our Parkville facility. The uplifted workforce model really recognises the complex challenge that it is and the professionalisation that is required to work with young people within our custodial system, so it is absolutely, fundamentally part of our broader workforce strategy, and importantly, alongside that uplift is an uplift in the skills that people are bringing to work everyday. Our staff undergo further training to be able to ensure that they can engage in what we title a behaviour change workforce model.

Danny O'BRIEN: That change from 1 to 2 and part of the uplift model, what is that additional cost in the past 12 months?

Andrea DAVIDSON: I would have to take that on notice.

Danny O'BRIEN: I am happy for you to do that.

Enver ERDOGAN: But we have got a new certificate IV in operational safety training as well that was rolled out, so it is professionalising the workforce to be able to address the behavioural issues of the young people. It was rolled out, and with a more skilled workforce, you need to pay more.

Danny O'BRIEN: I was going to ask, Minister, what have you done to improve, attract and retain – particularly the retention? In addition to the uplift workforce model, has there been anything else?

Enver ERDOGAN: Obviously the model, and also the facilities have given us an opportunity as a value proposition. A lot of people that are attracted to the field – and I have had that opportunity to meet many of them – do want to make a difference in these young people's lives. People can see the situation we are in, that we do have lower numbers in custody, better pay and conditions, better work environments. I think this has all helped us attract more staff, and I am pleased to say that we have got a strong complement of staff, considering the historically low number of young people in custodial settings.

Danny O'BRIEN: Commissioner, I wonder whether you can go further on the breakdowns. Can you provide a breakdown on those YJ1s and YJ2s for each of the facilities?

Andrea DAVIDSON: What I can tell you is the total from YJ1 to YJ3, because we have also through that workforce model uplifted our supervisors, so those staff that are providing that really critical practice supervision on the ground every day have shifted from a YJW2 classification to YJW3.

Danny O'BRIEN: How many of those are there?

Andrea DAVIDSON: In total we have 511 YJW1 to YJW3 staff within the system.

Danny O'BRIEN: How many at YJ3? I do not know that that is in the –

Andrea DAVIDSON: The YJW3 classification is included within the questionnaire. That is the supervisor-level classification. Beyond that we also have YJW4 unit managers and YJW5 operations managers.

Danny O'BRIEN: Okay. Are you able to give me the breakdown of the 1s and 2s at Cherry Creek and Parkville?

Andrea DAVIDSON: I do not have that, but I can certainly take it on notice.

Danny O'BRIEN: That would be great, thank you. Are you able to also provide job descriptions for the workers at the two different facilities? Are they the same job descriptions?

Andrea DAVIDSON: At the two facilities, yes. Against the uplifted workforce model, the positions are consistent throughout the system. The only point of difference is that at Cherry Creek government has invested in a front-end reception and security team. So rather than being as at our Parkville facility, where G4S are utilised for that function, at Cherry Creek we now have our own in-house function, and that is at a YJW1 level.

Danny O'BRIEN: Given what you said, though – probably 'higher security' is a way of putting it for Cherry Creek – is there not a different job description for people working there?

Andrea DAVIDSON: No. Although the cohorts may differ, what we know is that the complexity is very much there across all our cohorts. Working with young women, for example, is a different type of complexity, but their lives, their journeys, the complexity of their presentations are certainly equal.

Danny O'BRIEN: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. We will go straight to Mr Tak.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you, Chair. Minister, I would like to talk to you about health and wellbeing services. In your presentation you referred to there being supports for young people with diagnosed disability in contact with the youth justice system, and we know that people who find themselves in custody are more likely to have a history of complex medical issues. Minister, can you tell the committee about where the needs of these supports arise and how the funding is being provided through this budget to respond to these needs?

Enver ERDOGAN: Thank you, Mr Tak. Thank you for that question. You are correct in saying that young people who come into custody are statistically more likely to present with complex health, mental health and other psychosocial concerns, including developmental delay, cognitive impairment, experiences of trauma, high-risk behaviours and abuse of alcohol and other drugs. Specifically, I can refer to a snapshot of young people in youth justice custody on 2 June 2023, which showed that 68 per cent of young people in custody were accessing mental health support in relation to a diagnosed mental health illness, 25 per cent had a diagnosed cognitive difficulty and 82 per cent had a history of use or misuse of illicit or prescription drugs. We know that happy, healthy children and young people generally do not end up in the justice system. That is why I see the health and wellbeing services offered at youth justice as one of the most important parts of our overall service delivery. For those people who do come into contact with the youth justice system, addressing these underlying issues is vital in correcting their behaviour and giving them genuinely the best chance to turn their lives around.

Young people in youth justice custody have access to primary health care, mental health services, allied health, health promotion and services that address their needs with alcohol and other drugs. Primary health and mental health services include 24/7, so every day, all-time nursing and mental health nursing, medical practitioners, pharmacy, immunisations, radiology, pathology, dental services, audiology, optometry, allied health, health promotion and alcohol and other drug services. Again an important point I make is that for a lot of these young people – dentistry is a good example – it may be the first time they see a dentist in their life. It sounds shocking, but those are some of the statistics that we come across. Many of the young people I meet, it is the first time they have had this kind of level of medical care. It is theoretically available in the broader community, but for a lot of these young children it is the first time they get that care, in our custodial facilities.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you, Minister. You talk about the importance of access to primary health care in youth justice. How is that provided?

Enver ERDOGAN: It is important that we do have health contracts in place at both our facilities. Primary health and mental health are provided at both Parkville and at Cherry Creek by public health providers. As part of the design of Cherry Creek's opening model, we engaged health services that were public. In that case, Barwon Health is the provider at Cherry Creek. Additionally, we had a move to community health most recently at Parkville, to Cohealth, from 1 February this year. These providers are now successfully delivering a high level of care to the custodial population. I would like to take an opportunity to acknowledge all the health staff who work in our youth justice system and thank them for the work that they do.

Meng Heang TAK: Thanks again, Minister. You also refer to the provision of specialised mental health services. I can only imagine providing this type of service plays a very significant and important role in managing people in custody whilst also supporting their rehab. Minister, can you please expand on what these services offer?

Enver ERDOGAN: Thanks, Mr Tak. That is a really important topic. We know that the issue of mental health care is crucial to see change in some of these young people. We as a government obviously delivered the historic royal commission into mental health. This was a significant investment across the whole of government, and the mental health royal commission and subsequent responses about creating a road map ensure every Victorian, regardless of who they are or where they live, is able to get the mental health and wellbeing services they need. We know the profound personal and social benefits that adequate mental health care can provide, and that is particularly true in the context of the youth justice cohort. The provision of quality, effective mental health services is a critical part of addressing offending behaviour. Mental health is an important part of the primary health care we provide at both Parkville and Cherry Creek.

We also have specialised mental health services available for young people in youth justice from a multidisciplinary team that includes consultants, registrar psychiatrists, senior mental health clinicians, neuropsychologists, speech pathologists and addiction specialists. Further, the state-of-the-art Cherry Creek was especially designed to provide for a mental health unit, and as our Commissioner commented, Chair, we have eight mental health beds dedicated for young people. Those mental health beds present a unique opportunity for health service delivery in youth justice, and I know from a lot of ministers across the country some of our facilities are the envy of other jurisdictions. We really have the facilities and the staff. We currently work in partnership with Orygen to ensure the units can provide additional support and intervention for young people as called upon.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you, Minister. In terms of the support services for alcohol and other drugs, can you tell us more about the degree to which we are managing our young people who have problems with alcohol and other drug issues in youth justice, and what type of support is available for those in custody that have these sorts of needs?

Enver ERDOGAN: That is right. The evidence tells us that addiction and intoxication are major drivers of offending behaviour, and the abuse of alcohol and other drugs can be symptomatic of other issues for young people. That is why it is so vital that we provide young people in our care with the best opportunity to overcome these issues. That will increase their prospects of rehabilitation. Victorian youth justice responds to the needs by providing a range of services – whether it be alcohol or other drugs – which are designed to interact and complement services to address their behaviour and wellbeing. Some of these AOD programs are delivered in groups or individually, depending on the specific circumstances and the needs of the individual. The services are jointly delivered by Cohealth, Barwon Health, Orygen, Caraniche and the youth justice rehabilitation outcomes team within the department. Of note, the budget has provided funding for Orygen to establish a youth addiction dual-diagnosis team for specialist AOD.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister, and Mr Tak. We will go back to Mr O'Brien.

Danny O'BRIEN: Thank you, Chair. Minister, you mentioned that Malmsbury is now closed. What is happening there now?

Enver ERDOGAN: Malmsbury, as we announced, is going through a process – a consultation process – to decide on the future use of the Malmsbury facility. At the time we said we would consult with the local council and the traditional owners, and that work is being done. The site itself has been referred to the Department of Transport and Planning to undertake the first right-of-refusal process. So they are undertaking that process for the government.

Danny O'BRIEN: It is still held by justice at the moment though?

Enver ERDOGAN: I understand it has been –

Kate HOUGHTON: I think we have referred it to the land coordinator in the Department of Transport and Planning.

Danny O'BRIEN: Is that likely to be for sale? Or for other government use? That is the first part of the process.

Kate HOUGHTON: Yes, the first –

Enver ERDOGAN: That is the first part of the process – to see if there are other government agencies that would like to use the facility. We are hopeful that that process will conclude in the second half of this year. Then we will have a better line of sight of the future use.

Danny O'BRIEN: That follows the normal government process – is it formally declared 'surplus to requirements' by justice?

Kate HOUGHTON: It is from our perspective, and then it goes to the department and then they do right of refusal across all Victorian departments for other social, economic, whatever policy uses. Then, if not, then there are further decisions of government as to what to do with that land.

Danny O'BRIEN: So if no-one else wants it, it might be put on the market?

Kate HOUGHTON: Correct.

Enver ERDOGAN: Yes.

Danny O'BRIEN: Okay. Minister, can you explain the reason that there has been an 18-month delay in the strengthening youth justice precincts capital project, which is on page 75 of BP4. Strengthening youth justice precincts – \$58 million.

Enver ERDOGAN: I might ask the Commissioner to kind of explain some of the capital projects.

Andrea DAVIDSON: Thank you, Mr O'Brien. As noted, the 2017–18 budget originally committed \$58 million to the strengthening youth justice precincts initiative, and at that point in time the focus was very much on strengthening the Parkville and Malmsbury precincts, which had gone through a difficult period and required strengthening works across the board. Since that time, strengthening work –

Danny O'BRIEN: So was that actually physically strengthening?

Andrea DAVIDSON: Physical strengthening works. The works included installing secure fences to a range of areas throughout the site, hardening works including, particularly at Parkville, the substitution of glass with polycarbonate, removing glass objects at the site wherever possible, strengthening walls and ceilings in a number of units through the addition of fibrous cement sheeting or sheet steel laminated plywood, installing steel cages around potential entry points into the roof cavity and works to prevent access to roof areas by young people across all areas of the site at Parkville, replacing bedroom doors with strengthened custodial doors and replacing all entry and non-bedroom doors with solid reinforced wood or steel. Those works are coming close to completion at Parkville. They had been delayed somewhat due to COVID – in fact that was the primary delay. So there are some works being finalised there at the moment that will be finalised by the end of year.

Danny O'BRIEN: Okay. There is still \$9 million to spend next year?

Andrea DAVIDSON: That is correct. And those dollars are absolutely marked to complete the works at Parkville.

Danny O'BRIEN: You mean there will not be any overrun?

Andrea DAVIDSON: I do not believe so.

Danny O'BRIEN: Okay.

Andrea DAVIDSON: We are well on track.

Danny O'BRIEN: Minister, serious assaults on staff continue, and I notice in the ROGS data in fact that there were 23 assaults in youth custody across 2022–23. Half of those happened in Victoria. I am not sure whether that is on staff or whether that is with those in custody or not. Why is there nothing in the budget this year to improve the environment for workers?

Enver ERDOGAN: I think any assault on a staff member is unacceptable, whether it be in youth justice or corrections, to us as a government. Where an incident such as criminal behaviour takes place, we do refer it to police, and it is my expectation that those responsible are held to account. In terms of staff safety, I view that as our core job. So it is in the budget – it is in the core base funding for the department, just like staff salaries, staff safety and the facilities. These are the core purposes of that budget line item of our base funding. The *Report on Government Services* also does demonstrate that there has been a decrease in assaults. Like I said, though, even one assault is one too many in my view. There has been a reduction of 20 per cent in assaults and a 50 per cent decrease in serious assaults.

Danny O'BRIEN: Okay. Perhaps on that, can I ask the Commissioner again: how many of the staff within the whole youth justice system are currently on WorkCover leave?

Andrea DAVIDSON: I am very happy you have asked me about WorkCover, Mr O'Brien, because as the minister said, any assault or injury at work is one too many. However, we are very proud of our track record in terms of the year-on-year decreases that we have seen in WorkCover claims across the system for the past five years, including a 27 per cent reduction between the 2022–23 and 2023–24 years. At the present point in time, as at 31 March, there are 23 staff in the system on WorkCover.

Danny O'BRIEN: Twenty-three staff on WorkCover – how many of those are due to assaults?

Andrea DAVIDSON: I do not have the breakdown.

Enver ERDOGAN: Mr O'Brien –

Danny O'BRIEN: Okay. Can I ask: do you have a breakdown at all as to how many are mental health claims, for example?

Andrea DAVIDSON: No, I do not.

Danny O'BRIEN: No. So 23 staff of the 511.

Andrea DAVIDSON: Yes.

Danny O'BRIEN: Okay. You talked before about the very small cohort – my words – of very difficult repeat offenders, basically. How many of those are there?

Andrea DAVIDSON: That is a very difficult question to respond to. I think I would take that question on notice because it really depends on how you would frame up. I would say that –

Danny O'BRIEN: It is very subjective, but are we talking sort of a dozen that are the hard-core problem in the youth justice system, or is it more than that?

Enver ERDOGAN: Because we have got so few people, what you did not notice is a lot of the young people in our services – there are a lot of obviously repeat offenders, but some of them also high-tariff offenders.

Danny O'BRIEN: High what, sorry?

Enver ERDOGAN: High tariff – so they are people who do a high level of offending,

Andrea DAVIDSON: High harm.

Enver ERDOGAN: Or high-harm offenders. So we are talking serious assault, alleged murder –

Danny O'BRIEN: And how many of those are we talking about?

Andrea DAVIDSON: The deep complexity is that someone who comes to us as a high-harm offender does not necessarily present with that complexity in custody, so what charges they come to us with does not necessarily equate to how they adjust to the custodial environment. So it is highly dynamic. It is a very difficult question to respond to.

Danny O'BRIEN: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Davidson. We will go to Ms Kathage.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you, Chair, Minister and officials. Very interesting discussion so far – it is really fascinating. It is great to see the level of detailed care that is given to all the people in your custody, so well done. I just want to ask: on BP3, page 70, there is the initiative there 'Enhanced youth justice bail supervision and support'. Minister, can you tell me what this funding entails and what outcomes you are seeking through this funding?

Enver ERDOGAN: Thank you, Ms Kathage, for that question. It is an important investment in this budget. Before I get into specifics, I think it is also important to ground this discussion in some facts. Firstly, despite what some like to pretend, Victoria has one of the lowest rates of youth offending in the nation. We are below New South Wales, for example. And while people like to quote comparisons with recent years, the reality is that a lot of this is returning to pre-pandemic levels. I think that is what we have seen. During the pandemic I did not see anyone talk about how youth crime had plummeted. That was not the story during the pandemic, which those of us that were here last term will recall. That was definitely not the take. But there are genuine pockets of concern, and there are a small number of reoffenders who are driving the increase in serious offending. Together with Victoria Police, we are committed to holding them to account. To address this, we are developing a trial of electronic monitoring to help ensure bail conditions are followed. This is about keeping the community safe while giving authorities more opportunities to put these young people on the right path. There is some confusion concerning what this is about, so I welcome the opportunity to talk about the three components of this trial and how they will work. The first is obviously the electronic monitoring technology. We will have the capability to monitor up to 50 young people. Funding for additional staffing will support 24/7 monitoring. The second part is investment in an improved way of responding to and enforcing bail conditions. This includes additional funding for youth justice staff to develop the comprehensive risk assessment framework needed to respond to electronic monitoring bail breaches as well as improved interactions between justice agencies, such as Victoria Police and the courts. Courts are also supported with additional resources to support the pilot and ensure an appropriate level of monitoring. The third part is just as important, and I have to say a little bit overlooked – that is, the investments into more intensive support for young people subject to electronic monitoring through targeted programs and working with existing service providers. These are designed to help them get back on track.

I am committed to ensuring youth offenders are held to account for their actions and encouraged towards a better future. This will make the community safer for everyone. I understand the concern the Victorian community is facing, especially with the recent high-profile incidents. I share this concern. There is a very small number of young people who commit high-harm offending, and together with Victoria Police we are committed to holding them to account. Through various forms of supervision, including custodial, youth justice supports their rehabilitation, addressing the underlining cause of the offending behaviour and preventing reoffending. Electronic monitoring will be another tool in the arsenal to hold youth offenders to account, ensuring that they are following their bail conditions. That is a condition of them being out in the community and not in custody. This government recognises that those who pose an unacceptable risk to our community should be remanded. That is the law – that has not changed, and it will not change.

Our custodial facilities are in a good position, as I have stated. We do have capacity if they are found to breach those bail conditions. However, we know the evidence shows that the best way to actually change people's behaviour, and especially young people, is to address some of the underlying reasons for this antisocial behaviour – that is, working with young people in custody or before they enter the youth justice system. I think we will have greater tools through monitoring – making sure that the kids are complying with their bail conditions. Closer monitoring will mean a more intensive, enhanced level of supervision to make sure they are doing the programs they should be doing.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you. You mentioned there the response if someone does breach their bail conditions. What would youth justice's response be in that situation?

Enver ERDOGAN: The experts tell us that early intervention is the key to addressing offending behaviour in young people. One of the key benefits of electronic monitoring is that we will have the data to be able to intervene earlier to understand the root cause of the problem and move the young person towards addressing

their misbehaviour. This can include specific justice-oriented intervention services but also can include re-engagement with education and work skills programs, as well as more holistic services that aim to address issues relating to the family environment and other broader circumstances. With this additional data we will know why young people are not complying, what is happening.

Obviously under trial, courts can order young people who have been charged with serious offences to be subjected to electronic monitoring as part of their bail conditions. If there is noncompliance detected, such as breaching a curfew, the electronic monitoring will alert the authorities in real time, and the investment in the budget includes systems to ensure that the staff of the monitoring centre can get that information to Victoria Police so they can take appropriate action, creating an additional layer of protection for the community. It will also support follow-up actions. Instances of bail breaches detected by the electronic monitoring system will form serious conversations with the young person about their behaviour and about getting them back on track. Where appropriate, the monitoring will also provide clear evidence about compliance that could be used to revoke bail. That will happen. When people show that they are not going to commit to or fulfil their bail conditions, we can revoke that bail. The trial will include dedicated youth justice staff who advise the court about suitability and closely monitor bail compliance and progress, and court-based youth justice staff to deal with breaches. The monitoring will also send an important warning to young people to think twice about ignoring their conditions and provides an opportunity for targeted services we know can reduce reoffending. As explained earlier, this is a multifaceted approach.

Lauren KATHAGE: You spoke about I guess supportive, positive referral pathways. What sorts of places would people be referred to? Can you elaborate on that?

Enver ERDOGAN: Yes. We want people directed to positive pathways, directed towards services that can change their behaviour. We have a number of service providers that we work with. A prime example is the youth justice community support service, which is a resource to provide access to drug and alcohol, mental and general health services, housing support as well as education and training opportunities for young people. The support is also tailored to people with culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds as well as Aboriginal services delivered in partnership with Aboriginal community controlled organisations. The mechanism to refer people to services like this is backed up by more intensive case management and support resources to help this cohort correct their behaviour and re-engage in activities that are beneficial to their wellbeing and development. It is not only beneficial to them; it is beneficial for their families, because we know the impact this young person's misbehaving has not only on them but on their community more broadly. A lot of them are from large communities and large families, so it does have an impact on many people in our community.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you, Minister.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Kathage. We will go to Mr Puglielli.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon. To Mr O'Brien's questioning earlier, we have heard that there are currently 82 young people in custody, 47 on remand, so that is more than half on remand not yet sentenced, which is quite high. Of those 47 on remand, do you know how many of those are Aboriginal?

Enver ERDOGAN: The Commissioner may have that information. I do not have that information before me, Mr Puglielli.

Andrea DAVIDSON: Yes, I do. Of the Aboriginal young people in custody, we have 10 at that data point date of 21 May, four of whom were sentenced and six of whom were on remand.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. Thank you. And that is out of that cohort we were just speaking about, the total?

Andrea DAVIDSON: Correct.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: And then could you give me a bit of a breakdown of the age ranges?

Andrea DAVIDSON: I can give you a breakdown in so much as I can advise that there were no young people aged 10 to 13 in custody on that date, but I do not have a further breakdown beyond that. I can take that on notice.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: That would be great if you could. Thank you. Do you know how long these children have been on remand for?

Andrea DAVIDSON: No, I do not. I cannot give a figure around that.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Is that something that can be on notice? Is that possible?

Enver ERDOGAN: Some of it has got privacy conditions around young people and sharing information. We have got to be careful because were talking about such a small number that they can be identified.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay.

Enver ERDOGAN: I am not sure if we can provide that kind of information. Sometimes I do not even see that information, that level of detail, in their case management.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Is that something that can be looked into in case it is possible to share, or are you ruling that out here?

Enver ERDOGAN: If we have got any information to share – we will have a look at what we can provide.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. In terms of developing alternate service models, I understand there is an independent expert panel chaired by Patricia Faulkner.

Enver ERDOGAN: That is right.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: It is doing consultations now. Can we get an understanding as to when the report from that process is going to be released?

Enver ERDOGAN: Yes. The alternative service model is really important; we did allocate \$5 million in last year's budget as part of the establishment of that review panel. The panel is providing expert advice to government on the design and implementation of the alternative service model to ensure it is meeting its objectives. Patricia Faulkner is the chair, and the alternative service model will provide government with – we are due a report later this year.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Later this year?

Enver ERDOGAN: Later this year. That is the goal. To me and Minister Blandthorn – we are responsible. Obviously the funding last year was allocated to the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, because that is where we see the alternative service model will be positioned once it is established and not in the justice space.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. I understand you have said in the past that raising the age of criminal responsibility to 14 by 2027 is dependent on having an appropriate alternative service model, so by view of the government, could you give us an understanding of how quickly the Labor government is going to respond to that report when it is handed down, and are you committed to implementing their proposals?

Enver ERDOGAN: Yes. I think in terms of raising the age, I guess we are taking a two-stage process. The first is to raise to 12 first, no exceptions. That is the goal this year is to introduce legislation to do that as a sensible first stage, because we know there are very few 10- and 11-year-olds engaging in high-harm offending and then move to raising the age to 14 with exceptions and subject to an alternative service model. So that is the government position. In terms of when this alternative service model will be in place, I do not want to pre-empt the work of the panel because I do not know what their proposal will be. So depending on the proposal, I guess we will have a timeframe to be able to operationalise it. It depends how complex – whenever you set up a new system, it takes time. I do not want to pre-empt the findings of that panel.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. Are you not prepared to give an assurance to the committee today that the model that is proposed from that process will be adopted by government?

Enver ERDOGAN: I cannot make that announcement or that commitment today, Mr Puglielli. And I do share responsibility with Minister Blandthorn on this issue as well.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Of course. Thank you. Now, we know that many of the young people who do end up in youth detention have experienced child protection. One of the programs targeting that cohort is run by a youth support and advocacy service. It works with over 300 young people who have been the subject of police interventions, helping them change direction and engage more positively with their families and communities. There have just been reports today that this has been significantly defunded – I believe to the tune of \$1.85 million. Given that we know it costs a hell of a lot of money to keep a young person in detention, it would seem a no-brainer to maintain that kind of a program. Why was that funding pulled?

Enver ERDOGAN: I think, in relation to the program you are talking about, in this budget we have seen in some cases planned conclusion of additional funding that was provided during the pandemic. That specific example that I know about today that was reported was funding that was confirmed in November 2020, so it was a special pandemic budget, and it was clear it was four-year funding. That organisation is still a partner organisation of ours, but that funding did end at the end of that four-year period.

We know in justice that what works for some young people might not work for all young people. We do take a multifaceted approach, because not every program is appropriate for every young person. We have done a good job in keeping young people out of custody by the record low numbers we have – historically low numbers for this turn of the century. We still have a range of investments we are making. There are a lot of programs. Some of it is outside my portfolio, and I am proud to share that. Staying the Course is an education program of Minister Carroll's we are investing \$28.4 million in. The youth crime prevention and early intervention program is in Mr Carbin's portfolio, \$6.6 million. We have the Lookout program, \$8.4 million, which is for residential care kids, that cohort that you talked about. So we have a range of investments we are making across portfolios to keep young people out. That program you referred to is still a valued partner. We are still funding them to the tune of \$3.4 million in this year's budget, but obviously the pandemic November 2020 level funding has ceased. It was the end of the fixed term. It was a four-year term. That was the condition.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Yes. You have made that quite clear. Thank you, Minister. With regard to your portfolio and children and young people, could you give us an indication of how much of your overall budget is dedicated to policing and law enforcement as opposed to early intervention and prevention of contact by children and young people with the justice system as delivered in your portfolio?

Enver ERDOGAN: We do not do policing and enforcement per se. I think we do custodial facilities, and obviously youth justice engages with young people under supervision. But I do not like necessarily comparing them because you can do both and I think as a government we have shown we can do both and that is why we are investing in all these programs. A lot of it is outside my portfolio because we are diverting them away and that is why we have got record low numbers in the youth justice system. If you look at a lot of our investments, it is front ended in our government, so I do not think it is fair to compare what is being funded. But I can tell you about a billion dollars in this budget goes to prevention or making sure that young people stay out of the criminal justice system.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. Mr Hilakari.

Mathew HILAKARI: Thank you, Minister, and thank you, officials, for your attendance this afternoon. I might just take us to budget paper 3, page 151. Just to quote what it says there. One of the objectives provides:

... a range of services including diversion services, advice to courts, offence related programs, community based and custodial supervision.

Through much of your presentation today and some of the evidence given I understand, and correct me if I am wrong, that we are at historic lows in terms of young people in custody presently. I would just like to hear a little bit more about the services that we are offering to achieve those historic lows, but also how we come to choose them and support them through our budgets.

Enver ERDOGAN: Mr Hilakari, that is right. They are historic lows for the turn of the century, and we are proud of that as a government. That is only possible because of the investments we have made in diverting young people away from the criminal justice system. We all around this table agree that we do not want to see young people in the youth justice system at all. We want them living happy, healthy lives in their communities with their families.

In terms of the services we are investing in, we are investing in things that the evidence shows are effective. The basis of our approach is in our *Youth Justice Strategic Plan 2022–2030*, which provides a road map for reforming our youth justice system. It is anchored in a landmark youth justice review and strategy by pre-eminent experts such as Penny Armytage and James Ogloff. It is a 10-year vision. Key initiatives as part of that include launching *Wirkara Kulpa*, which is our first Aboriginal youth justice strategy. Its vision is that there is no Aboriginal child or young person in youth justice because they are stronger and connected into culture, to family and living healthy, resilient lives – thriving culturally rich lives, I might add. Implementation of the early strategy is working. We are seeing lower rates of 10- to 17-year-old Aboriginal young people in custody. Our commissioner has shared with us that there are only 10 young Aboriginal people in custody in Victoria at the moment. We do not want to see any, but again it is a downward trend more broadly and we want to keep it going lower than ever.

We have also had an opportunity to launch our youth diversion statement, which outlined a youth justice commitment to prevention, diversion and early intervention as the most effective and fiscally responsible way of reducing youth crime. In the years since we implemented this program we have been largely successful. Victoria's average is one of the lowest rates of youth offenders, with 1.6 out of 10,000 young people aged 10 to 17 in custody. We have introduced initiatives to reduce over-representation of culturally and linguistically diverse young people, including the establishment of our South Sudanese Australian youth justice expert working group. The work we are doing in this strategy is already seeing positive results, and I think those low numbers are reflected there. But there is always more we can do, because there is still over-representation, but I am proud of the outcomes to date.

Mathew HILAKARI: Just on *Wirkara Kulpa* – and apologies if I have pronounced that incorrectly.

Enver ERDOGAN: No, that is fine.

Mathew HILAKARI: This is our first Aboriginal youth justice strategy, is that right?

Enver ERDOGAN: That is right, Mr Hilakari.

Mathew HILAKARI: And how is that contributing to our objectives around closing the gap?

Enver ERDOGAN: As a government we know there is a lot of work to be done to address over-representation of Indigenous youth and help close the gap, and the government has made that commitment. It is a key initiative. It is really important. As part of that objective we have committed to implementing initiatives to keep 10- to 17-year-old Aboriginal people out of the youth justice system. We can see some of these initiatives already working. Our goal is to see a reduction in Aboriginal young people in custody by 30 per cent, and we have already met that target.

Mathew HILAKARI: Do we know the time period when we were hoping to meet that target?

Andrea DAVIDSON: The closing the gap target was by 2031.

Mathew HILAKARI: And we have met it already?

Andrea DAVIDSON: We have met that already.

Enver ERDOGAN: Already, yes.

Andrea DAVIDSON: So we have to now sustain that.

Mathew HILAKARI: Of course, and that is a huge part of it, and that is why I am so glad the strategy is part of the works that we are doing, but that is just really terrific to hear, because some of those closing the gap targets have been really sticky. Some have gone the wrong way. So it is great to hear that we are achieving this one here, and that sustainability plan forward.

I do want to take us to the South Sudanese Australian youth justice expert working group, and I am interested in understanding more about this work. In the western suburbs there are many young people from a South Sudanese background, so I would like to hear about it.

Enver ERDOGAN: That is right, and there is a geographic basis for a lot of the work the South Sudanese working group is doing and targeting. It is focused in the outer south-east and the western suburbs of Melbourne. The South Sudanese community has had a traumatic journey to Australia – many of them refugees, many of them in camps, families not only dislocated but separated, and the trauma that brings with it. But we know that we have seen over the last 10 years an increasing over-representation of South Sudanese young people in contact with the criminal justice system, and as a government we said that we are here to address these challenges, but we can only do it in partnership with the South Sudanese community, so we have set up our youth expert working group. That expert working group is taking a strengths-based approach, a community-led approach, to working with young people, communities and their families.

In terms of additional funding in this budget, our expectation is that it will complement the investment we made last year. Initial findings will also inform our approach to the use of this investment. We are looking to partner with experts in the field. Santino Deng is our chair of the committee. We also have the commissioner for children and young people as part of that working group, so they are really experts – South Sudanese community members and expects more broadly on children and young people collaborating together to find solutions. I have seen some exciting work done by a range of agencies in the south-east and the west, and it will complement some of the work and funding we have recently announced for the Centre for Multicultural Youth, as you would all be familiar with, Ms Connolly and Mr Hilakari, both of you especially in the west.

Mathew HILAKARI: Yes, very much so.

Enver ERDOGAN: That work is targeted in the west really to address those issues. A lot of partner organisations are really passionate about making a change, and I feel like we are at the precipice of seeing a big, drastic change. I think we are not there yet, but the work that this committee is doing – slowly plugging away, direct contact with the communities and families – I think we will see a difference in outcomes for South Sudanese Australians.

Mathew HILAKARI: That is really fantastic. It is much appreciated, that work, in the communities that I and the Chair do represent.

I thought I might take you to the youth diversion statement, and just in your presentation it was fantastic to see 98 per cent successful completions in 2022–23 for the Children’s Court diversion service, but separately – oh. That is all right.

Enver ERDOGAN: Thank you, Mr Hilakari.

Mathew HILAKARI: I will take this one offline.

The CHAIR: I hate to cut you off there, Mr Hilakari.

Minister and officials, thank you very much for appearing before the committee today. The committee will follow up on any questions taken on notice in writing, and responses are required within five working days of the committee’s request.

The committee is now going to take a break before beginning its consideration of the youth portfolio at 3:30 pm.

I declare this hearing adjourned.

Witnesses withdrew.