

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 commit**

WITNESSES

Lizzie Blandthorn MLC, Minister for Children;

Peta McCammon, Secretary, and

Danny O’Kelly, Deputy Secretary, Community Operations and Practice Leadership, Department of Families, Fairness and Housing;

Jenny Atta, Secretary,

Bronwen FitzGerald, Deputy Secretary, Early Childhood Education,

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

Jessica Trinder, Executive Director, Strategy and Planning, Victorian School Building Authority, Department of Education;

Professor Euan Wallace, Secretary, Department of Health; and

Annette Lancy, Deputy Secretary, Children and Families, Department of Families, Fairness and Housing.

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, any 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 evening 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 Children the Honourable Lizzie Blandthorn as well as officials from DFFH, the Department of Education and the Department of Health. Minister, I am going to invite you to make an opening statement or presentation of no more than 10 minutes, after which time committee members will ask you questions. Your time starts now.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Thank you very much, Chair, and thank you to the committee for the opportunity to present to you this evening in relation to the children’s portfolio.

Can I first begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land we are meeting on today and pay my respects to elders past and present.

Visual presentation.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: The children’s portfolio was created in 2023, when Premier Allan became Premier, to support children and families to be safe and well while also improving equity, access and outcomes for children and families. This new portfolio places the child at the centre of a better connected, more integrated system by linking key system touchpoints across the different departments. We support children and families across maternal and child health through the Department of Health, early childhood education through the Department of Education and children and family services focused on children aged 0 to 12 and adolescents and keeping children safe and families strong through both child protection and care services through the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing. Through the work of the children’s portfolio we work with our

partners, including our community services partners, to ensure that Victoria remains a great place for children to grow and to learn.

Next slide. Every child and family has access to maternal and child health services in Victoria; indeed our services are nation leading. We know that the early years of child health, wellbeing, learning and development are vitally important, and that is why we continue to invest in free statewide maternal and child health services, providing health and wellbeing support following childbirth and working in partnership with mothers, fathers, carers and parents. There have been over 600,000 key ages and stages consultations, 14,000 families supported through enhanced maternal and child health consultations and 100,000 callers supported by the 24/7 maternal and child health phone line.

To give Victorian kids the best possible start in life, in 2024–25 we have committed to investing \$28.8 million over three years to expand statewide maternal and child health services. This investment includes additional funding for universal and enhanced maternal and child health services; Aboriginal maternal and child health services, giving parents the option to access culturally safe maternal and child health care at their local Aboriginal community controlled organisation; a maternal and child helpline, meaning more parents and carers can speak with a qualified maternal and child health nurse 24/7 to discuss any concerns; and interpreter services, allowing families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds to better engage with the services. Just last week I was at a centre in Dallas in Hume where I heard how successful this program has been. We are also continuing the popular baby bundles and nursery equipment program, giving first-time parents the essentials they need. Since 2019–20 the Victorian government has invested \$19 million in ongoing operational funding for expanding the early parenting centre network.

Early childhood education and care services for pre-primary children focus on high-quality three- and four-year-old kindergarten. The \$14 billion Best Start, Best Life reforms to early childhood education have set the standard for the nation and have been driving our work in this area. We supported an 11.5 per cent increase in enrolments in three-year-old kinder. Last year 88.7 per cent of children were enrolled in a three-year-old kindergarten program – that is 67,413 children enrolled in three-year-old kinder, with a further 78,293 children in four-year-old kinder. This is a remarkable achievement given the funded program only went statewide in 2022. And almost 96 per cent of eligible children were in a four-year-old kindergarten program.

The 2024–25 Victorian budget invests \$128.6 million in Best Start, Best Life reforms, including three-year-old kindergarten. We are continuing to deliver free kinder, with around 140,000 children benefiting from free kinder in 2024 and approximately 97 per cent of services choosing to participate in the program. Next year pre-prep will roll out in six local government areas ahead of it being gradually rolled out across the state. We are also continuing to deliver kinder kits for the 2025 year. And the first four of 50 government-owned early learning and childcare centres will open in Victoria in 2025, followed by 14 more in 2026. Since we have come to government we have invested over \$8 billion in early childhood education and care, including \$3.6 billion allocated to early childhood infrastructure. This funding includes the first 35 government owned and run early learning and childcare centres and 100 kindergartens on or near schools. It is also delivering and supporting new and expanded kindergartens across the state.

Child protection and family services, sitting within the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, is also part of the children's portfolio, providing young people and families with family services, child protection, care services and leaving care services. Victoria has the lowest overall rate of children in care in the country, and the 2024–25 Victorian state budget continues this work with a \$374 million investment in the child protection and family services system. We supported over 19,246 families with integrated family services in 2022–23 and managed over 128,000 reports to child protection. At this point I must acknowledge the dedication and tireless work of our child protection workforce. A real achievement is that we also had over 73 per cent of Aboriginal children placed with kin in 2022–23.

We know that intervening earlier for families will help them with the critical supports that they need to thrive. The 2024–25 state budget provides \$198 million to continue earlier intervention and diversion supports. This includes connecting families through early help family services, and restoring families, covering family preservation and reunification, family group conferencing and putting families first. The children's portfolio also oversees the family preservation and reunification response service model for Aboriginal children and families, and so far this has helped more than 4900 families. It is estimated to have kept more than 200 children, including over 50 Aboriginal children, safely at home with their parents compared to previous

placement prevention programs. The 2024–25 Victorian state budget also allocates \$14.1 million from the disability portfolio to continue services for families with a child or parent with a disability, ensuring critical supports from mainstream and NDIS services.

Four billion dollars has been invested in the child protection and family services portfolio over five years from 2019–20 to 2023–24. The 2024–25 state budget invests \$374 million over four years for child protection and family services, including \$38.4 million to improve outcomes for children and young people in home-based care, including ongoing funding for the care support help desk and care hub, and \$128.2 million to continue critical functions of child protection and residential care workforces, which includes \$1.7 million to continue building and documenting the evidence-base for an Aboriginal-led child and family services. This builds on the investment in Aboriginal child and family services that we delivered in last year's budget, which was \$140 million over four years, starting in 2023–24. When fully implemented, the Closing the Gap initiative from last year's budget along with the existing investment will support the expansion of the ACAC program to allow for 1152 children to be authorised to an Aboriginal community controlled organisation by 27 June; an additional 144 Koori supported playgroups each year by 2025–26 across the state; an additional 330 Aboriginal families each year by 2025–26 to receive an Aboriginal-led rapid response engagement and family services, aimed to divert families away from the child protection system; an additional 85 Aboriginal families each year by 2026–27 to receive an Aboriginal-led response under the Aboriginal family preservation and reunification response; the Community Protecting Boorais program expanding to a total of 348 children by 2026–27 to have their reported concerns of harm investigated by an authorised ACCO; and more than 600 children to have their case plan implemented by an ACCO through contracting Aboriginal children to an ACCO.

On 8 February this year – it is worth this important point as well – we all know Premier Jacinta Allan made a formal apology in Parliament to Victorians who experienced historical abuse and neglect as children in institutional care. We were all there, and it was an important and emotional day to hear the stories of everyone who was there. The 2024–25 Victorian state budget will invest \$165 million for a redress scheme for those Victorians in recognition of the ongoing impact. The Victorian government acknowledges the impact of historical abuse and neglect that too many Victorian children experienced while placed in institutional care. The Victorian government is currently working through a co-designed process for the scheme with key stakeholders and people with lived experience, and we want to get this design right. We know that people have been waiting a long time for this investment in this redress.

In conclusion, Chair, I thank you very much for the opportunity to discuss the children's portfolio and these important initiatives with you today. The children's portfolio does represent an important opportunity to bring together, in a holistic way, the children's services in the state of Victoria. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, Minister, for that presentation. The first 10 minutes are going to go to Mr O'Brien.

Danny O'BRIEN: Thank you, Chair. Good evening, Minister and team. Minister, you would be aware that last week the Commissioner for Children and Young People revealed there were 160 reports of 85 children living in residential care being victims of child prostitution in the past year. There were 434 children living in residential care as at November 2023, so that is nearly 20 per cent of children. The Premier said in response to a question in Parliament last week she does not consider this a failure of state care. Do you?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Thank you for the question, Mr O'Brien. This is a question that we have discussed a number of times in the Parliament, both in the Assembly and in the Council. Children in residential care are amongst the most vulnerable in our community, which is why they are in residential care. Any exploitation of these children who are in vulnerable positions is of course a concern for all of us, I think, at this table, wherever it is that we are coming from. But it is also why in last year's budget we invested more than half a billion dollars, \$548 million, over four years to improve outcomes and support children living in residential care in a number of ways, including wrapping therapeutic supports around children but also directly tackling the issue of exploitation, including sexual exploitation, of children who might be in residential care.

Danny O'BRIEN: Can I ask how much of that money was specifically directed to that issue?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Specifically, the 2023–24 state budget enabled the department to increase the number of sexual exploitation practice leads from 11 to nine, and this allowed us to expand the services across all 17–

Danny O'BRIEN: Sorry. That is not an increase, Minister – 11 to nine?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Sorry, 11 to 19.

Danny O'BRIEN: Nineteen. Right.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Eleven to 19 across the state. It also allowed us to ensure that it was delivered across all of the regions and in the after-hours service. Just earlier this week I was out at the south division and met with one of the practice leads doing this important work. It is of course – as all child protection work is – very difficult and confronting work. But she spoke with me about what the expansion of this service has meant across the state and ensuring that we do have the opportunity to respond to the types of concerns that CCYP have raised and that also come to light through other channels.

It is important to note that children in residential care are not in a custodial setting. They are in care, so in the same way any other 15-year-old is able to go out and live a normal 15-year-old's life, we want to, as far as possible, encourage that for these children. But at the same time, it is extremely important that we are disrupting those who prey on the vulnerable circumstances of these children with the important work that we funded in last year's budget, which included the \$13.4 million over four years to better target sexual exploitation.

Danny O'BRIEN: Can I put my initial question again but add in to it the comments from the commissioner:

... there's an obligation on that state to act as a parent and, indeed, under law to act as a good parent. That's not what we're doing.

Would you agree?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Well, firstly, I thank the commissioner for her ongoing contributions in relation to upholding the rights of children and young people across the state. It is important work that she is doing as well. Certainly, through this investment of \$13.4 million specifically in the sexual exploitation work and through the more than half a billion dollars in improving residential care and ensuring that the supports that are wrapped around children in all placements in residential care are indeed therapeutic, I think the state is showing that we are committed to addressing both the immediate needs of these children but also protecting them from further exploitation.

Danny O'BRIEN: Which I want to go to. The commissioner has said she is in no doubt the network of predators know where the residential care homes are. How much was expended on improving security systems at the residential care properties in the past 12 months?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: I might be able to ask the Deputy Secretary to talk to some of those issues, but in the first instance I also just want to reiterate the point that children who are in residential care homes are in homes where they are receiving care, they are not in custodial settings. So –

Danny O'BRIEN: I get that. I get that this is very, very difficult.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: their capacity to move around the community and participate in community life in the same way other young people can is absolutely paramount to ensuring that those children are getting the same experiences, while they are having the service of residential care wrapped around them. But the Deputy Secretary might like to add to my answer.

Danny O'BRIEN: Mr O'Kelly, while we are there, you might be able to tell me how many of the 100-plus residential care properties were reviewed for security upgrades or received security upgrades in the past 12 months.

Danny O'KELLY: They are not secure facilities, so –

Danny O'BRIEN: I guess what I am talking about are things like CCTV and the like to –

Danny O’KELLY: CCTV cameras are not standard in all residential facilities. They are homes –

Danny O’BRIEN: Are they in any?

Danny O’KELLY: They are in some. There are some where there are CCTV cameras in place, usually facing outwards, because what they are attempting to –

Danny O’BRIEN: That is entirely what I am talking about, yes.

Danny O’KELLY: Yes, in order to identify those people who might be preying on children who live in residential care. The other thing that we have some new investment to do is around the creation of a central team, with a director whose role will be to develop our information sharing system with Victoria Police so that we can get much more timely and much more deliberate information sharing processes around where we think there are kids who are vulnerable and predators who are targeting children who live in residential care. The work we do with VicPol is really important to try and really get that focus on chasing down people who are at times probably deliberately targeting some of the places where really vulnerable kids live. There is a body of work that happens for all of those kids as we identify those kids when they are at risk that makes sure that there are things like safety plans in place. Those kids will have significant care teams that are wrapped around them that will work really hard to put safety as much as we can in place, noting again that they are not secure facilities. So we have got –

Danny O’BRIEN: Is it the view of the department that more security at the homes themselves would help? And that goes back to my original question: how much was spent and how many of them had an upgrade last year?

Danny O’KELLY: I do not think it is as simplistic as security at the homes. I think there are a raft of things that we are doing –

Danny O’BRIEN: Yes. Obviously, a lot of this is happening outside the homes.

Danny O’KELLY: Yes. And some of the things that we are able to do now that we are confident will increase safety are things like: we have got more capacity to have two-bed units – smaller residential facilities with therapeutic overlay. We have got therapeutic overlay in most of the four-bedroom units now, so there are additional supports going into those resi facilities to do the work –

Danny O’BRIEN: I need to move on, sorry, Secretary. Can you confirm that all current residential care workers hold the mandatory minimum qualifications of a certificate in child youth and family intervention or recognised equivalent?

Danny O’KELLY: They will either hold it or they will be working towards it. If they are working towards, it is a requirement that they get an exemption.

Danny O’BRIEN: Do you know how many have got an exemption?

Danny O’KELLY: I would have to take that on notice, Mr O’Brien.

Danny O’BRIEN: That would be great if you could. When do they have to have the full qualification? Is there a cut-off?

Danny O’KELLY: It will be a circumstance-by-circumstance basis.

Danny O’BRIEN: Right. So it is not a timely thing.

Danny O’KELLY: And that is with the agency that is supporting those staff. That is work that we would do with them.

Danny O’BRIEN: In the latest quarterly incident data published, of the 313 incidents of abuse recorded in residential care, how many were allegations of sexual abuse?

Danny O’KELLY: Of the year to date?

Danny O'BRIEN: It was in the quarterly report for quarter three for this year, January to March. There were 313 incidents of abuse. How many were sexual abuse?

Danny O'KELLY: This is my maths not being fantastic. It would be about, of the total – apologies, Mr O'Brien, I am just trying to do the maths in my head.

Danny O'BRIEN: Have you got a percentage instead?

Danny O'KELLY: I know it is a reduction on last year, but what I have not got is the total number of abuse. I have got the numbers of sexual abuse, not the total numbers of abuse.

Danny O'BRIEN: If you want to give me what you have got there, perhaps. What is the number of sexual abuse?

Danny O'KELLY: Year to date?

Danny O'BRIEN: Yes. Whatever data you have got there, Mr O'Kelly.

Danny O'KELLY: It is 215, year to date.

Danny O'BRIEN: Were victims of sexual abuse?

Danny O'KELLY: Where there is an allegation of sexual abuse.

Danny O'BRIEN: Allegation. Right. And do you know the quarterly figures for that third quarter?

Danny O'KELLY: For the most recent quarter?

Danny O'BRIEN: Yes.

Danny O'KELLY: I have got year to date. I have not got it broken down quarterly.

Danny O'BRIEN: Okay. No problem. Thank you.

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

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Chair. Good evening, Minister, secretaries and officials. Thank you for joining us. Minister, I would like to take you to the 'Department Performance Statement', specifically page 38, the performance measure 'Reports to child protection services about the wellbeing and safety of children'. In light of the figures here, Minister, what is the current case allocation rate for child protection practitioners?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Thank you, Mr Galea. I appreciate the question and the opportunity to, I guess, address some of these issues in more detail than sometimes the argy-bargy of the chamber might afford us. In the first instance, I just want to acknowledge that on any given day in our child protection system we have 17,000 children who are involved with the child protection system. I appreciate that allocation rates are often an issue of interest to the committee, and as I said there as well, Mr Galea, it is raised in the chamber with us at times. I think it is really important to be clear that there is always active oversight of all children who are involved in child protection. All children who are involved with child protection are assigned to a team and overseen by a team manager. Indeed as I referenced earlier, just this week I was out at the south division talking to some of those team managers and talking to them about the way in which they manage and oversee the children who are within their care and the constant decisions and considerations they are taking into account in relation to each and every single one of those children. It is the team manager who has responsibility for reviewing, monitoring and managing cases and making allocation decisions. These allocation decisions are made on a case-by-case basis, and it is, as I said, ever evolving. The level of risk to the child is the primary consideration for a team manager in making these decisions and determining allocation priorities, and children at significant risk of harm are absolutely prioritised for an allocation to a specific practitioner. It is a constantly evolving assessment process, always looking at the risk of each child coming in and out of child protection on any given day.

In the third quarter of 2023–24, there was an average of 84.2 per cent of cases which were allocated to a practitioner with 15.8 per cent of cases that were being managed within a team, which equates to 3358 cases

awaiting allocation. And the context for that is important. The allocation rate was 81.5 per cent in December 2014, when we came to government, so that allocation rate has increased. It equated to 2691 cases awaiting allocation previously.

Danny O'BRIEN: Sorry, Minister. I just did not hear. What was the figure – 3000 and something unallocated?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Currently, there are 3358 cases awaiting allocation, which was 81.5 per cent in December 2014 as opposed to currently 84.2 per cent allocation rate. So the allocation rate has improved 2.7 percentage points higher than when we first came to government. It is also important to note that we have got more reports than ever before, as is clear in the performance measures cited in your question, Mr Galea. We are receiving a significant number of reports, which inherently lead to more across the child protection family services system, but for that reason it is also extremely heartening that these numbers are continuing to improve. We do have more child protection staff than before, we do have lower case loads than before, and we have higher allocation rates. There is always more work to do of course, but that is encouraging.

Michael GALEA: Indeed. Thank you, Minister. On page 37 of the same document and the performance measure of daily average number of children in residential care placements: Minister, how many under-12s are in residential care?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Thank you, Mr Galea. Firstly, can I say it is always a priority to place children and young people who cannot live safely at home with their parents in either kinship or foster care arrangements, and it should be said at the outset that kinship is certainly our fastest and highest and of course most preferred method of care, but when these options are not available we do at times have to place children in residential care, and it can be at short notice in terms of needing to find a placement. The decisions to place children in residential care, including children who are under 12 years of age, are always based on the individual circumstances of that particular child. Sometimes young people are placed in residential care due to their complex medical needs or indeed to keep a sibling group together, which is also important. Young children in care, though, is always a difficult matter, and it is something that certainly I and Secretary McCammon and Deputy Secretary O'Kelly all have a focus on in ensuring that this number is as low as possible. The care service system is not static, though, and this number does at times fluctuate. As at 30 April 2024 there were 43 children under the age of 12 in residential care, which I note is lower than the number I provided the committee on notice this time last year when we had the same questions. At 30 April 2024 children under the age of 12 made up 9 per cent of the overall children and young people in residential care. It is also worth noting that one of the reasons, as I said, that young children are sometimes within residential care is for particular disability support needs, and of that number, 23 of those children are children who have high disability support needs. I want to be clear with the committee that we are seeking always to keep this number as low as possible. Reducing it is a focus of the department's and mine; it is always something to which we are applying additional oversight. It is at times unavoidable, and we do work in the case of each and every one of those children to make sure their placement is the most appropriate placement for their circumstances.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. I also understand we have what are called contingency placements. Minister, what are contingency placements, and how many do we currently have operating in Victoria?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Thanks, Mr Galea. As I said in answer to the last question, every effort is made to keep children at home and where they cannot be at home for them to be in kinship care with extended family and friends or foster care. When it comes to placements in residential care, as I said, in answer to Mr O'Brien's question, this does represent some of the most vulnerable children in Victoria. One of the tools that we use is a rare tool, but outside of those types of placements – foster care, kinship care and residential care – sometimes we do use contingency care. It accounts for less than 1 per cent of the total care services operating on the daily average occupancy. It is due to our focus on the other placements, as I said – kinship, foster, residential care. As I advised the committee last year on notice, contingency placements are set up in exceptional circumstances where there are no other suitable placements either to address an urgent short-term placement need to facilitate care for a child who has complex needs which cannot be met in any of those other existing placements and/or to keep a sibling group together. As of my last update on 31 March, 27 children or young people were residing in what we refer to as a contingency placement. Some members of the committee might be aware that last year that number that was 53, so as I said, it is one of those areas that we are constantly seeking to improve and minimise the use of. Sometimes it is unavoidable for all of those reasons that go to what are in the best interests

of any given child at any given time. So it is a rare type of placement, but we are also pleased that that number has gone down significantly.

Michael GALEA: That is very good to see. Thank you, Minister. Back to the original budget paper reference I gave on reports to child protection services about the wellbeing and safety of children, Minister, what sort of data is available to show any of us as the committee or the broader public the ongoing performance of the child protection and family services system?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Thank you. In part that goes to Mr O'Brien's question earlier in relation to the data that he was seeking, but we do have the additional quarterly data operational for performance, which is available on the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing's website by searching 'additional quarterly data operational performance'. Of course we appreciate the need for regular reporting of our operational performance outside of the 'Department Performance Statement'. It is important that we are transparent with the public on how we are tracking and that all of those who are interested, which I am sure is all of us, in the protection of children have access to that important data.

It covers several performance measures which may be of interest to the committee, including the number of child protection reports, investigations and allocation rates and family services performance. In relation to the allocation rate that we were discussing earlier, the performance data shows we are experiencing a high number of reports and investigations, for example. Importantly, despite the increased work across the statutory child protection system, though, as I said, we are maintaining a higher rate of allocation than when we came to government, we also have lower case loads, which is important, and it is always worth keeping that in mind when we are reviewing these data points.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Minister. Just lastly, incident data – is that also collected by the department and publicly reported?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Yes, that is right.

Michael GALEA: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, Mr Galea. We are going to go to the Deputy Chair.

Nick McGOWAN: Thank you. Thank you, Minister, and thank you for the work that you do and your officers and child protection officers. I am sure that if Matt Bach was here, he would want me to say that as well. He is in another place, though.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: We miss him.

Nick McGOWAN: Sadly, he is not here.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: It would be good if he was here.

Nick McGOWAN: It would be. This is perhaps for the Deputy Secretary or the secretaries. We understand that last year, in respect to the kinder rollout I should preface this by saying, all the centres were eligible to receive 15 hours of funding per week for three-year-old kindergarten. Do we have any data on how many centres and how many children are actually receiving the full 15 hours?

Jenny ATTA: Mr McGowan, we will just see what data we have got in front of us. Of course the three-year-old kinder was a staged rollout across the state, moving up to that 15-hour offering by 2029. I will just see if Ms Fitzgerald can provide any of the detail.

Bronwen FITZGERALD: We have data that shows that of the services participating in the three-year-old kindergarten program in the 2023 calendar year, 80 per cent were offering the full 15 hours.

Nick McGOWAN: What is the raw number? When you say how many services, how many services are there?

Bronwen FITZGERALD: I do not have the raw number of services to hand, but it would be 80 per cent of just under 3000 services.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: And it does equal 67,413 children.

Nick McGOWAN: Would you be able to provide us with that specific number at some point? I know you say it is roughly 3000.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Yes.

Nick McGOWAN: That would be great. So therefore there are 20 per cent that are not yet providing that 15 hours. Do we know what the barrier is for them?

Bronwen FITZGERALD: It is appropriate that at this stage of the rollout not all services will be at the full 15 hours. The policy settings for this stage of the rollout are that services can offer between 5 and 15 hours and we will fund them pro rata for the hours that they can do. There are a range of reasons why services will be not yet at the full 15 hours. Those reasons include individual service programming choices that might be influenced by service leadership or by the community. There are also some services where they are working on expansions of facilities or looking for additional infrastructure to come online in their local community, and at that point they will move to the full 15 hours.

Nick McGOWAN: Do you know how many of those kindergartens have adopted the free kindergarten model?

Bronwen FITZGERALD: Of the kindergartens that are offering three-year-old kindergarten, we do not break down the free kinder participation rate specifically for three-year-old kindergarten. For kindergarten overall the percentage of services that are offering free kinder is 97 per cent.

Nick McGOWAN: Ninety-seven per cent. In terms of I suppose looking forward in respect to the next 12 months but forward from that, have you had a chance to examine what pre-prep will mean in terms of the workforce and infrastructure and what needs to be done in that space, Minister or whoever can answer that?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Certainly we have modelled that. Is your question about the free kinder or about pre-prep?

Nick McGOWAN: Pre-prep.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Pre-prep, yes. Obviously as part of the Best Start, Best Life reforms we are continuing to deliver pre-prep. We are doing it on a more gradual timetable, as was announced in the budget. This will provide more time to build that additional infrastructure and to also, as you referenced, grow the workforce. We have had a successful \$370 million program to grow the workforce, but of course this more gradual rollout will relieve that pressure in the system and allow us to deliver the full rollout of pre-prep more gradually, which is the access to up to 30 hours of kindergarten in the year before going to school, which is where it is the four-year-old delivery, not the three-year-old delivery. The free kinder and three-year-old delivery remains unaffected by that.

There is no change to the rollout of pre-prep in 2025, and services in the six local government areas where pre-prep rolls out in 2025 can offer between 16 and the 30 hours of pre-prep. For most rural and regional LGAs there is also no change to when pre-prep starts, but maximum program hours will obviously increase in stages as part of that more gradual rollout. Services in rural and regional LGAs scheduled to start pre-prep in 2026, 2027 and 2028 can initially offer up to 20 hours per week of pre-prep, and this will increase up to 25 hours in 2029 and up to 30 hours per week from 2031. From 2026 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, children from refugee asylum seeker background and children who have had contact with child protection will have access to up to 25 hours of pre-prep a week, increasing to the 30 hours from 2028 irrespective of where they live, and from 2028 children who have a parent or guardian who has a Commonwealth concession card or are part of a family with multiple births – triplets and more – will have access to up to 25 hours of pre-prep week, increasing up to 30 hours in 2030.

Importantly, services in Ballarat, Bendigo and Geelong will start offering up to 25 hours of pre-prep per week in 2032, increasing up to 30 hours from 2033, and in greater Melbourne pre-prep hours will also gradually increase up to the 30 hours per week. Starting in 2034 services can offer up to 20 hours of pre-prep per week,

increasing up to the 25 hours in 2035 and up to 30 hours from 2036, and by 2036 children in all locations across Victoria will be eligible to access up to the 30 hours of pre-prep.

As part of all of that we continue to build new kinders on or near school sites, like you and I have been talking about in relation to Ryrie, and kinders at non-government schools; continue Building Blocks partnerships and grants with councils and other sector partners, which of course remain critical; and continue investing in our workforce programs, like I referenced in relation to the \$370 million. That is how we have modelled out that gradual change that is featured in the budget.

Nick McGOWAN: Thank you, Minister. I appreciate that. In terms of the rollout that was previously – there was a 2024 budget timeline certainly by year in the rollout in each LGA. Is there an updated version of that we can be provided with?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Yes, that data I just went through is updated and available on the website.

Nick McGOWAN: It is on the web already; that is great. I suppose one of the concerns we have also is obviously – and you are familiar with this, I know – say in Knox, for example, where suddenly a council takes a certain action which means that there is quite a substantive void to fill. Have you had a chance to have contact with a number of the kindergartens in particular to make sure that incidents like that are not going to occur across the board, because obviously there would be a shock to the system in terms of both supplying those services but also the sustainability of them going forward and the implementation of these programs.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: It would be fair to say that – and I think the Premier referenced this when she was here at the beginning of your hearings – the sector recognises in some senses, in some parts really, that there is that release on pressure, I guess, in terms of the rollout of the pre-prep program. Certainly organisations like MAV, early learning Australia and others have publicly come out and said that in their view it will have that effect of releasing the pressure on the system to deliver both the infrastructure and the workforce on the original timeline. This more gradual rollout does allow us to give the services the time to address the workforce concerns that some had and deliver it more gradually.

Nick McGOWAN: Is there an infrastructure delivery schedule too in terms of that, to obviously ensure there is appropriate space and so forth?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Yes, absolutely. Obviously, the more gradual rollout means that different services will need different infrastructure at different points in time to what was originally modelled, and that work has been happening to look at what that will be and where and when, but of course the relief in the infrastructure is also a big part of it.

Nick McGOWAN: What sort of work is the department doing to work with these kinders? Do you have any detail about what that looks like or what the plan is in terms of engagement?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Since the budget came down two weeks ago now, the department has been engaged in those conversations with our partners particularly in local councils but also in other parts of the non-government sector. Those partnerships are critical to the success of the rollout going forward, and those conversations are very live at the moment about what it looks like and what it means on an individual basis.

Nick McGOWAN: Okay, thank you. You talked a little bit there about Ballarat. Do you have any other figures around Ballarat in particular?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: In relation to?

The CHAIR: We can come back to you, Mr McGowan. We will go to Mr Tak.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you, Chair, Minister, secretaries and officials. I want to talk on the statutory child protection workforce. I refer to the 'Department Performance Statement', page 38, and the performance measure on reports to child protection services about the wellbeing and safety of children. Minister, in relation to the statutory child protection practitioners workforce, can you advise the committee of the number of vacancies across the statutory child protection program?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Yes, sure. Thank you. As I spoke to at this committee last year, we have funded since we came to government an additional 1180 additional child protection practitioners. That is an increase of 85 per cent capacity, which is huge. As I said earlier, I think in relation to Mr Galea's question, there is growth, there is demand, so this 85 per cent increase is critical. It necessarily means that we will need to increase our recruitment in line with this significant growth, and I think it is important to view any discussion around vacancies in that context. Practically, when you almost double the workforce, it is not unexpected that filling this new capacity takes some time. So an increase of 85 per cent does mean that we have work to do in terms of being able to recruit to these particularly difficult roles. I do think that the work that child protection practitioners do is among some of the most difficult if not the most difficult in our community.

As the Treasurer stated, workforce pressures across the social services system are a focus of this budget, and the discussion we were just having with Mr McGowan in relation to workforce in the early education sector is also a part of that. But child protection is certainly not immune from these pressures, and in some ways they are more pronounced.

As of 30 April, to go specifically to your question, there were 388 vacancies within child protection. Just in relation to those vacancies, it is important to note that (1) there is the increase, and (2) there is a lot of work happening to try and address those vacancies.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you, Minister. In terms of those vacancies that you just cited – 388 – can you advise the committee of how this number compares over time and whether the vacancies are reducing?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Yes, sure. As I said, we are seeking to fill the vacancies, and over a three-year period from 2019–20 to 2022–23 the child protection workforce has increased by 289 FTE, which represents a 14 per cent growth over these years – so we have had the 85 per cent growth in funded positions and we have had the 14 per cent growth in FTE. Our current 388 vacancies are a reduction from the figure of 463 when I was asked a similar question on notice at last year's hearings, and I should also just say that the continued recruitment into the child protection program and the reduction in those vacancies demonstrates the success of a number of the initiatives that we have across the department in terms of attracting and retaining workforce to these particularly difficult roles.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you. In relation to that growth in child protection practitioners on the ground and the vacancies being filled, what would you attribute this to?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Thank you. First, I would say there is no silver bullet. As I am sure other ministers have advised the committee, in relation to particularly the social services space, with workforce shortages, I am sure generally, there is no silver bullet in how we address them. Our success in filling our vacancies has been through a suite of different initiatives that support both the recruitment and the retention of child protection practitioners.

Support is key, and in my view central to all our recruitment and retention work is the need for our workforce to know that they are supported and that we back them in the important work that they do. This is not only by their direct leadership but also from, I guess, my perspective as minister, from the Secretary, from the deputy secretaries and from us as a government as a whole that we value the work that they do. It is a tough job – I do not think anyone here would doubt that – and I certainly want all child protection practitioners to know that we do support them in the vital work that they do.

One of the things that sometimes saddens me a bit in the conversation about filling workforce in child protection vacancies, I guess, when we are limited to a question time in the chamber or whatnot – the worst thing that we can do is talk down the work that these frontline workers do. Indeed, as I referenced earlier, I was talking to some child protection workers out in the south division earlier this week, and talking them down does have a direct impact on them, but also recognising the work that they do as a fundamental and particularly emergency service is really critical to retention. Making sure the workforce feels valued and that they know that we value them as a frontline service really is critical.

As an example of supporting and backing the workforce, last year I had the privilege of attending the Victorian Protecting Children Awards, and these awards recognise and celebrate individuals, teams and groups who demonstrate excellence in working with children, young people and their families. I have also attended the child protection vacation employment program and career advancement program graduations, and these

programs provide the opportunity to recognise the successes of the workforce, to recognise the work that they do supporting children and families across our children and family system and to demonstrate our collective support for this vital workforce. We also have a number of other programs which are central to our efforts to recruit and retain child protection practitioners. We have the Go Where You're Needed recruitment campaign, which focuses on the life-changing work that child protection practitioners do each and every day. We have international recruitment to support qualified and experienced practitioners to relocate to Victoria – and again I met a couple earlier this week. We have the child protection vacation employment program, which provides social work students with paid on-the-job experience, creating a recruitment pipeline for child protection but also ensuring that people who are doing that study are getting opportunities – paid opportunities importantly – for on-the-job experience. We have the switch to social work program, which is encouraging career switchers to move into the child and family services sector, including into child protection; the career advancement program, which is a statewide professional development program for staff in lower level child protection practitioner roles to build on their leadership skills and allow them to see what the pathway for them is going forward; and the child protection wellbeing program, which supports practitioners with workload and the challenging nature of child protection work that can impact on both the mental health and the wellbeing of people who are working in child protection.

Meng Heang TAK: Just to follow on with that: are there any initiatives in the budget that will help in that continued effort to fill vacancies, Minister?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Thank you. Certainly the budget continues this important work. As part of the 2024–25 state budget we are continuing critical workforce supports which are part of an \$8 million investment which will continue to deliver the career advancement program; the child protection employment program, which has had a slight name change – it was the vacation program; and the Go Where You're Needed work as well. In relation to the career advancement program, it will train 200 child protection practitioners per year, and as I noted earlier, this is a statewide professional and development program for staff in the lower-level child protection practitioner roles so that they can build their capabilities to move into more senior roles. As I said, I also attended the graduation. This program is important for retention of the child protection workforce, with 90 per cent of career advancement program graduates over the last three programs still being employed in child protection and 77 per cent having been promoted or placed on higher duties since their graduation. So not only is it getting people in, we are keeping them there and we are putting them on a pathway.

The child protection employment program, which has been running since 2015, offers entry-level graduates studying social work, psychology or another welfare qualification the opportunity to get paid work experience in a structured and supportive way. This program is provided to 100 participants, with an average of 350 applications to the program. It is a 12-week full-time or 16-week part-time paid employment program and targets high-performing final-year students and recent graduates as well from relevant fields of study. The program is having great success. Go Where You're Needed – and as I said earlier there is no one program, there is no one silver bullet, but each of these programs in its own way is making a contribution to both recruitment but also retention and putting people on a pathway to some of those more senior roles, which sometimes are more difficult to fill.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you, Minister. Now I would like to move to page 37 of the 2024–25 'Department Performance Statement' and the performance measure of the daily average number of children –

The CHAIR: Apologies, Mr Tak. I will stop you there. We will go to Mr O'Brien.

Danny O'BRIEN: Thank you, Chair. Secretary McCammon, I assume, for foster carers?

Peta McCAMMON: Yes.

Danny O'BRIEN: There is no funding in the budget to increase the care allowance for foster carers, but I am wondering if you can tell me what the indexation rate is that the department uses or will use for this coming financial year.

Peta McCAMMON: Yes, let me just find it. I think it is 2 per cent, but let me just double-check that. Give me a minute. For 2023–24 the indexation rate was 2 per cent.

Danny O'BRIEN: What about for next year?

Peta McCAMMON: I think we are still working through that.

Danny O'BRIEN: Okay. You do not use CPI, I take it?

Peta McCAMMON: There are a whole range of factors that go into that, including what we are actually funded from the government.

Danny O'BRIEN: How do you calculate it if it is not straight CPI?

Peta McCAMMON: As I said, it is a mix of what we are actually funded by the department as well as other factors that we take into account.

Danny O'BRIEN: Given the cost-of-living increases, do you expect next year you will have more money for carers allowance?

Peta McCAMMON: I do not know what the 2024–25 indexation is at this stage.

Danny O'BRIEN: Do you know what the funding from the government is for the carers allowance?

Peta McCAMMON: I do not have the total aggregate here, I am sorry.

Danny O'BRIEN: Are you able to take it on notice for me?

Peta McCAMMON: I am happy to take that on notice, yes.

Danny O'BRIEN: Thank you. You would be probably aware that the administration of funds under client expenses for foster carers has been perhaps described as 'lumpy' – different outcomes for different applications. The department previously promised to conduct a review of the administration of client expenses funding. When will that review commence?

Peta McCAMMON: I will just check if Danny has –

Danny O'KELLY: I am not sure of the timeframe of that. I am not sure whether Deputy Secretary Lancy might know the timeframe. I am just not sure of the timeframe.

Danny O'BRIEN: Is it this year?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Mr O'Brien, we could perhaps ask Deputy Secretary Lancy to come to the table. She might be able to assist here.

Danny O'BRIEN: Rather than waste time doing that, could I get you to check, Mr O'Kelly, perhaps? Then I will move on to another question and you might be able to come back to me.

The Cube report, Secretary, on the economic value of foster carers to the Victorian economy, was partially funded by the department. Can you please provide a copy of that to the committee?

Peta McCAMMON: I recall you asked me this last year, I think. That report was actually done by the centre for workforce excellence, so we will need to consult with them in terms of the release of that report.

Danny O'BRIEN: If I asked it last year, did you not consult with them last year?

Peta McCAMMON: No, I have not, I am sorry.

Danny O'BRIEN: It was partially funded by the department, though, so do you not have any ownership of it?

Peta McCAMMON: When we fund a partner to do a piece of work, they still have ownership in relation to that work.

Danny O'BRIEN: The client expenses funding – how much money is allocated for court-mandated parental drug tests under that bucket?

Peta McCAMMON: I do not have that.

Danny O’KELLY: It is not a specific amount.

Danny O’BRIEN: Does the department appreciate that it is a little unfair that parental drug tests are funded out of that bucket of money? Could they be funded separately?

Danny O’KELLY: I suppose they could be funded separately.

Danny O’BRIEN: I appreciate there is a benefit for the child, but effectively it is reducing the amount of funding that is available for the child’s education and the like. That is something you might consider on notice perhaps.

The PAEC performance outcomes report that we tabled in March this year states:

... as it stands it will be difficult for DFFH to meet its overall goal of reducing Aboriginal children in care by 45% by 2031 and the Government acknowledges that the rates of Aboriginal children in care are worsening.

Have you revised that target at all for 2031, or do you intend to?

Peta McCAMMON: I believe that is the Closing the Gap target, so we would not be in a position to revise that target.

Danny O’BRIEN: Can you explain why the rates of Aboriginal children in care are in fact worsening, Secretary?

Peta McCAMMON: The latest data we had was that there was a slight decrease in the number of Aboriginal children in care, and there was a significant investment in the last budget in relation to significant work that we will be doing with ACCOs in relation to improving the number of children in care. But I would say that what is really important in that work is that that is being led by Aboriginal organisations in the spirit of self-determination. There is significant work particularly, as the Minister referred to, in the Community Protecting Boorais pilot, with some great leadership from VACCA and BADAC in relation to that work. It is early days, but we are starting to see some positive results.

Danny O’BRIEN: Very quickly, Secretary, will the department be providing progress reports on the recommendations that the government has accepted from the *Yoorrook for Justice* report?

Peta McCAMMON: Yes, we will follow the whole-of-government process with the Department of Premier and Cabinet in relation to what progress or publication we will have with those recommendations.

Danny O’BRIEN: Thank you.

Nick McGOWAN: Minister, forgive my ignorance – does the Best Start, Best Life infrastructure program include the 50 government-owned childcare centres announced last year?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Yes, it does.

Nick McGOWAN: It does. Great. In respect of the four sites that were slated to begin operations in 2025 – Eaglehawk North, Moomba Park, Murtoa College and Sunshine Primary – are they still on track to be delivered?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: They are, and I was at Moomba Park the week before last with the Member for Broadmeadows unveiling the schematics for the designs, announcing the architects and builders.

Nick McGOWAN: Do we have an interim expenditure amount for those or an anticipated budget for each one of those?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: I might just pass to the Deputy Secretary while I find the right page for you.

Nick McGOWAN: Perhaps while the Deputy Secretary is looking for that, do you have a timeline in terms of when you are going to determine the other sites?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Yes, sure. Just bear with me for a second.

Nick McGOWAN: And I am happy to put in a shameless plug for Ringwood, Ringwood, Ringwood.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: I think you have got me coming to Ringwood, haven't you?

Nick McGOWAN: Message repetition, Minister.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: The first four of them were obviously Eaglehawk, Moomba, Murtoa and Sunshine, as you mentioned. The 14 ELCs that have been announced to open in 2026 – as part of the announcement at Moomba Park the week before last I added another four to those – which importantly create 1440 new places for children are Clunes, Teesdale, Hallam Primary School early learning centre, Harrisfield Primary School early learning centre, Kings Park Primary School early learning centre, McClelland College early learning and childcare centre, Mickleham South primary school early learning and childcare centre, Numurkah Primary School early learning and childcare centre, Portland South Primary School, Toolern Waters primary school, Wedderburn College, Wilmot Road Primary School, Wollert Andrews Road primary school and Wyndham Park Primary School, noting that all of those are interim names. In addition to that, government-owned and government-run early learning centres have also been confirmed for the following locations, but not specific school sites or otherwise yet: Alexandra, Avoca, Bendigo South, Casterton, Churchill, Cohuna, Cranbourne, Dandenong, Drouin, Foster, Glenroy, Hamilton, Hampton Park, Lynbrook, Heidelberg West, Lalor, Maffra and district, Maryborough, Melton West, Mickleham, Mildura, Newborough, Nicholson, Portarlington, Reservoir, Rochester, Rockbank, Roxburgh Park, Seymour, Warnambool, Wonthaggi, Woori Yallock and Yallourn North. Importantly, these are the 50 government owned and operated ELCs. I think, if I take your Ringwood example, what you and your school community were looking at there was a kinder on school site as opposed to an ELC.

Nick McGOWAN: Yes. But I am happy to take both, Minister.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: . Yes. Just to clarify the difference.

Nick McGOWAN: If I can add to your list: Mitcham, Vermont, Blackburn, Blackburn North, Ringwood, Ringwood North.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: I can also give you information on KOSS if that is what you are after, but that is not what you have previously spoken to me about, if that is where you were going.

Nick McGOWAN: I have got Heathmont as well; I do not want to leave them out. In respect to the operation of those centres, how advanced are the government in terms of an EBA around the employment structure for those people in those centres?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Discussions are ongoing. I might ask the Secretary or someone else to add to that on an operational level.

Nick McGOWAN: Thank you.

Jenny ATTA: Sure. We are working away on that and recognising the importance of the employment arrangement for our early childhood workforce, so working through a detailed employment framework to be finalised shortly in time for recruitment of staff in the centres. We would be looking to move to recruitment around August. We are working hard at the moment to settle that framework to offer public sector jobs with wages and conditions aligned with enterprise agreements covering early childhood services.

Nick McGOWAN: Thank you.

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

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you, Chair, Minister, secretaries and officials. I want to talk about maternal and child health. It is maybe a little bit of a walk down memory lane for me; my youngest child had their last MCH appointment recently, so no more running around the house yelling, 'Where's the green book?' before the appointment. But they are at the top of the bookshelf now, and lovely memories there of the fantastic staff and all the support they provided. I think the job of those maternal and child health nurses is finding so many

different ways to respond to the question, 'Is my child okay, is my child normal?' That is a lot of their job with parents, and they are fantastic. I can see on page 51 of BP3 we have got 'Meeting demand for Maternal and Child Health services.' Can you run through, Minister, what is included in that initiative?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Thank you for the question. I was just last week running around the house looking for the green book because my Patricia came home from school – prep, obviously past the key ages and stages visits that you need the green book for, but I had to answer how much she weighed when she was born, how long she was, all of the things that had completely gone out of my head, and I had to search through the green book to find the answers to her assignment for her.

Lauren KATHAGE: Cheating.

Mathew HILAKARI: It is an educational resource as well.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: That is it. I do not know that you ever get to give away the green book. And I have ideas about the green book, but we will get there.

Nick McGOWAN: Point of order – the Chair apparently had a red book, it must be said, Minister. The Chair apparently had a red book.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Oh, a red book. Your children a little older than mine and Lauren's.

Nick McGOWAN: I had the blue. I had a blue book – appropriate – three blue books.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: You had blue? Okay.

Nick McGOWAN: I did have blue.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Well, it has been green for a while, so that shows – I do not know. I was 40 when Patricia was born, so yes, it was –

Mathew HILAKARI: Your time is up, Mr McGowan.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Anyway, it is late and it is Friday. Going back to our important maternal and child health services, one of the great things about the children's portfolio is bringing together maternal and child health with the education and care and with the child and family services. As the green book shows us, they are all so interconnected, so bringing together the portfolio in this way I think is really exciting. But when we look at maternal and child health funding specifically, the government has allocated \$28.8 million in funding for the maternal and child health service, and it is important to note that the maternal and child health service is a primary health service available to all Victorian parents and carers of babies through to school age, which I have to say, certainly when I go to forums like disability ministers, for example, our system is the envy of the country in that regard.

MCH is delivered by the Victorian government in partnership with local government, which is really important, and obviously via appointments with maternal and child health nurses, usually at a council-managed facility. The objective of the service is to support and inform Victorian families, and it does play a vital role in promoting health, wellbeing, safety, learning, development and answering, like you say, those questions of 'Is this all normal?'

It is also important to note, as I know you did in your question as well, that the maternal and child health service is delivered by extremely highly skilled and expertly trained maternal and child health nurses. In order to practise as an MCH nurse in Victoria, MCH nurses are required to hold a current registration with AHPRA as a registered nurse division 1 and registered midwife and, in addition to the above registrations, hold an accredited postgraduate qualification in maternal and child health nursing. Again, this is the envy of the country, and it is why when I speak to other ministers around Australia they really are envious of the service that we do have here in Victoria.

Our MCH service incorporates a suite of services and programs, including the universal service, an enhanced service for those families that might need it, an Aboriginal program in particular that is culturally safe and trusted by Aboriginal people, the 24/7 maternal and child health telephone line and the green book. Also

included are our baby bundles for babies of first-time parents – I just missed out on a baby bundle; I think they came the year after Patricia was born – an interpreter service, and safe cots and car seats for vulnerable families through the nursery equipment program as well.

We do have, through our maternal and child health service, those key ages and stages visits, which include the 10 initial visits, and these appointments start with a home visit. For most families this will be within the first few days that a baby comes home from hospital. The MCH nurse comes around to the home, checks on the baby's sleeping arrangements and talks to the family about feeding, immunisation and other safety issues so parents and carers can feel confident going forward in relation to all of those things. Following this initial home visit, appointments would usually be held in an MCH council-run centre. There are so many of them, particularly in metro Melbourne. They are usually relatively close to home. The visit schedule includes the two weeks, the four weeks, the eight weeks, the four months, the eight months, the 12 months, the 18 months and the two years and three to five years, which I am assuming is where you have just completed your journey.

At each of the maternal and child health appointments, the MCH nurse will perform evidence-based activities to not only monitor the development of the baby but also to offer additional support and advice to the parents and carers. These evidence-based activities may include activities such as playing with the children, talking with mum and dad, measuring and weighing the baby, discussing safety issues, immunisation, hip checks, communication and language development, oral health and facilitating parents' attendance at a parent group. So there is a range of issues that are obviously looked at, addressed and spoken about with the families.

Importantly, though, at these visits families are also screened for signs of family violence, which is so important, and for other risk factors like smoking, co-sleeping and those kinds of things. The MCH nurse will also use these appointments to determine whether there is a need for additional consultations through that enhanced program, which is also an amazing service, and also if there is an opportunity or a need for referral to other services as well – from parent groups to playgroups to more specialised services.

Lauren KATHAGE: Yes, I think everyone needs support when they have got young children, but some people need a bit more support. You mentioned the enhanced maternal and child health program. What sort of specific additional supports does that provide?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Thank you. When I was meeting with some Macedon maternal and child health nurses recently, they made exactly the point that you are making that everyone can be vulnerable at some point. Often the arrival of a baby is a point where there might not otherwise be signs of vulnerabilities in a home, but the arrival of a new little person might bring with it some of those challenges. It can obviously be an extremely exciting time in your life, but it is also a challenging time, so our enhanced service really is critical. The universal service is offered to all families, but through that anyone can be referred to the enhanced service as an extension of that universal service.

The eligibility for it is determined by these highly qualified maternal and child health nurses and may be extended to families of children with increased risk outcomes of poor outcomes or where other multiple risk factors have been identified, and that extension includes an additional 20 hours of maternal and child health support for children up to three years of age. A case study that had been given to me that I think really demonstrates the importance of this enhanced program was a 22-year-old mother with a six-month-old baby who was born with a congenital abnormality and who had returned home following an extended stay in hospital, and the MCH nurse provided the mother with enhanced maternal and child health to assist in developing connections with relevant services with the goal of transitioning the mum and baby back to the universal service.

The enhanced MCH service supports the mother to deliver social connectedness and may be used to support the parent with referrals to the national disability insurance scheme, community allied health services, supported playgroups, early childhood services and community-based transport, for example. There are so many things that can be done through the enhanced service, which, as you identified in your question, really is that extra bit that some families need at that point in time.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you. We have been talking tonight a bit about improving outcomes for Aboriginal families in Victoria. Are there some specific streams under the maternal and child health package to support families to reach better outcomes?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Yes, there definitely are, and one of the things when you talk to ACCOs, you talk to Aboriginal people, is that having a culturally safe and appropriate place for Aboriginal people to go with their family is really critical, and the Aboriginal maternal and child health service gives Aboriginal families that choice to access culturally safe maternal and child health services via the 15 Aboriginal community controlled organisations which are across 17 sites, and they offer families the flexibility to choose how they access maternal and child health services, which of course strengthens self-determination in Aboriginal communities. I am a huge fan of BDAC, and Dallas, who is the CEO of BDAC, gets sick of me saying that he is one of my favourite people. But just last month I visited Dallas and his team at Bendigo and District Aboriginal Co-op in Bendigo to see firsthand their amazing work, and they are just incredible; Julie, the maternal and child health nurse there, is amazing.

Lauren KATHAGE: And you might not know, but I think an additional benefit of the baby bundle bag is that it is a conversation starter for mums at the supermarket.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Completely.

Lauren KATHAGE: ‘We’ve both got the same bag.’

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: It is such a good point, yes.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister and Ms Kathage. We are going to go to Mr Puglielli.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you, Chair. Good evening, everyone. I would just like to start by thanking you for the quite comprehensive information you have given this evening. I do not think we have seen that at every session throughout this process, so it has been really awesome so far.

Some of my questioning might overlap somewhat with what Mr O’Brien has been raising with the committee this evening. I had a quite frankly depressing read through some of the statistics of rates of Aboriginal children in out-of-home care, specifically those who the Productivity Commission has – it has a table that effectively shows children in out-of-home care and in a home-based placement as at 30 June for each respective year, and it segregates it by state and specifically for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the stats. In the table, since 2018, every single year, the number has increased. Starting with 2018 you have got 1390; it goes to 1575; 1695; 2021, 1796; 2022, 1806; and 2023, 1821 – quite depressing figures, and behind each of these numbers is a person, a child, as we know. So in consideration of that data, and we have mentioned the closing the gap targets this evening: Minister, in your view are you confident that Victoria will meet the closing the gap target of a reduction of Aboriginal children in care of 45 per cent by 2031?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Thanks for the question. The over-representation of Aboriginal children in care is an issue that I hope concerns all of us, and I think your question is a really important one. It is one that certainly since I became child protection minister with the responsibilities for child protection I have been particularly exercised about, and I obviously gave evidence at Yoorrook in relation to it as well. It was certainly one that the previous Premier, Premier Andrews – and the current Premier as well, but going certainly going back to when I became minister for child protection, Premier Andrews had made this a particular focus, that where we are is not good enough and that we need to do everything we can to reduce the over-representation of Aboriginal children in the out-of-home care system. To that end Premier Andrews and I, when I first became child protection minister, had a series of discussions with each of the ACCOs. I just mentioned Bendigo, who have been one of the leaders in this, but there are many others as well. Karen Heap at Ballarat and Aunty Muriel at VACCA and all of the alliance partners across the state, who are all committed to working with government so that together we can reduce the number of Aboriginal children in care.

I say that at the outset, but one of the things that came from those discussions was also the importance of the Aboriginal-led sector being able to self-determine what were the best ways in which to help address this problem. Last year’s budget was when we had the \$140 million investment over the four years starting from the financial year we have just ended to support Aboriginal organisations to make decisions for Aboriginal children in Aboriginal care. Concurrently with that we have also had the statement of recognition Bill pass the Parliament with the support of the Greens party and the support of the opposition, because I think we all are on the same page in seeking to reduce the number of Aboriginal children in Aboriginal care. The important thing with that piece of legislation was that it gave us the opportunity to – we already had the Aboriginal children in Aboriginal care program, but what the legislation did was allow us to fully implement the Protecting Boorais

program as well where Aboriginal organisations become authorised to investigate incidences or reported incidences of harm against Aboriginal children. Again, Bendigo is doing that, VACCA is doing that. It is an important program that is about ensuring that we build those partnerships with the Aboriginal-led system for them to have an important part in that. So between the work that we are doing through the statement of recognition Bill and then Protecting Boorais, through the work that we are doing with the Aboriginal-led organisations to partner with them, we are seeking to drive down the number.

We have a priority for kinship care as well. Kinship care is the most common form of care in Victoria, and we are ensuring that we have children placed with kin. That is obviously particularly important for Aboriginal children. So we are implementing a range of programs, working with Aboriginal people on what is the best way to drive down these numbers, but we remain absolutely committed to driving them down.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: I appreciate the comments that you have made and the commitment that you are expressing. With respect to the target, are you confident that we are going to meet it?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: The targets are important, and we absolutely need to meet them, and we absolutely need to do better. I absolutely hope that we do.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. Thank you. And you may have answered this just before, but with respect to the figures for 2024, because those figures were for 30 June for each respective year, do you anticipate that the number will come down?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: As I said at the outset and in answer to some of the early questions, there are 17,000 children in the child protection system on any given day, and it is a fluid system – it is constantly evolving. Those considerations in relation to what is in the best interests of each and every child and the assessments in relation to risk are constant, so it is evolving.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. And I suppose to progress on to one of the things that you mentioned, being that children health legislation Bill that was passed last year, how do you expect that the work from that Bill is going to result in change in this area?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Well, the statement of recognition Bill, as I said, allowed us to fully implement the Protecting Boorais program. The Protecting Boorais program is where Aboriginal organisations are authorised to investigate reports of child protection as opposed to the Secretary and the department taking the lead on that. It does mean that for organisations like BDAC in Bendigo, like VACCA, who are doing this work, that they are the ones who are directly working with Aboriginal families in relation to reports of incidences of harm or neglect or whatever it might be in relation to Aboriginal children. They can use the wraparound services that an organisation like VACCA or BDAC have that are culturally appropriate and culturally safe to ensure that those families are getting what they need.

I was going to say, in response to Ms Kathage's question before, the day I visited Bendigo I visited with a family, and you could see the whole of the Bendigo operation wrapping around this particular family – they had beautiful new babies in their families – bringing together the early education supports, the maternal and child health supports and the family services supports that exist there onsite in one co-located place that is culturally safe and culturally appropriate and working with that family on whatever their particular needs might have been. The more we can do that, family by family, child by child, then that is how we drive down those results.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: With respect to the budget, for the implementation of the Act, are you able to give a bit of a breakdown of how much has been allocated for that work?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: I might refer to the Secretary or Deputy Secretary for that.

Peta McCAMMON: I think, picking up on the minister's comment about last year's budget, there are elements from the Act that will be covered from last year's budget. There are also elements, particularly around skilling up the child protection workforce, that are BAU work for us in terms of rolling out new training. We do not have a discrete line just allocated to the legislation because it is quite blurred across –

Aiv PUGLIELLI: I can appreciate that. Is there a way perhaps for that to be disaggregated and provided to the committee?

Peta McCAMMON: I am happy to have a look at that. It is not necessarily how we budget –

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Of course.

Peta McCAMMON: but happy to take it on notice about what we might be able to provide.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: And if possible within that, maybe the range of programs to which each aspect of that funding is attributed would be good to just get a sense of the scope of the work involved.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: We can certainly take that on notice and look at what we can provide you. Some of it goes across the whole system as well. It is not as if the \$140 million is the only money that goes to supporting Aboriginal families and the Aboriginal system; the system as a whole is set up in a way that should certainly be supporting Aboriginal people and Aboriginal children. There are obviously distinct programs that came out of that \$140 million, but the 2023–24 investment, for example, builds on the previous state budgets which invested in things like early help. So there are other programs that are, I guess, more systemic as well that have been around for a longer period of time. We can endeavour to provide something that is helpful to your query.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Puglielli and Minister. Mr Hilakari.

Mathew HILAKARI: Thank you, Minister and officials. Great to see you here on this wonderful Friday evening. I do not think the footy has started yet, so we are all okay.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: I think it is Perth time, the footy, isn't it?

Mathew HILAKARI: Is it Perth time?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Yes, I do not think it starts till 8 or something.

Mathew HILAKARI: Oh, good.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: I looked at that to see if anyone was going to be disinterested in what we were talking about.

Mathew HILAKARI: Anyone slightly distracted, maybe watching their phone a little bit more.

I am going to take you forward to kindergarten Building Blocks improvements and inclusion grants. Minister, I want to thank you for the wonderful time that we had in Point Cook together at a kindergarten. The children there were just so excited seeing the building progress next door, the cranes up in the sky, all the workmen doing different bits and bobs. It was a very exciting time at that kindergarten, and we did make some – I think there was some sand-based pasta as well in the playground.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: We did. It tasted delicious.

Mathew HILAKARI: There you go. I did not try any myself, but, you know, you are the minister – what can I say. I am hoping you can talk to me about the kindergarten Building Blocks improvement and inclusion grants and just maybe start with a bit of what the program is about.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Yes, sure. Either eating mud pies or sand pies or playdough – in fact I think the Member for Broadmeadows and I the other day made lanterns – definitely the fun part of the day is going and participating in the kinder program. Steve Dimopoulos got very excited by the playdough a few weeks ago.

Mathew HILAKARI: Well, we have got him on Monday.

Nick McGOWAN: Do you have a colour, Minister, or just plain?

The CHAIR: It brought back childhood memories.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: It was blue playdough.

Mathew HILAKARI: Blue playdough – we will bring some on Monday.

Danny O'BRIEN: Sorry, can I just confirm that? He was excited by playdough.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: By the playdough, yes.

Mathew HILAKARI: He is still to come.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: I think he is here on Monday, isn't he? You could set the playdough –

Mathew HILAKARI: That is right.

The CHAIR: Please ask him that question.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Yes, you can ask him about the playdough at the Oakleigh children's hub. He was very excited.

Mathew HILAKARI: We will ask him.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: But on a serious note, the Building Blocks improvement and inclusion grants are an important part of our Best Start, Best Life infrastructure strategy. Certainly since the rollout of three-year-old kindergarten and associated reforms, and obviously going subsequently into free kinder and pre-prep as part of those reforms, the Building Blocks infrastructure strategy is what is really ensuring that we have the infrastructure that is needed in place at the right time, to go to Mr McGowan's question earlier in relation to what that looks like. The Building Blocks improvement and inclusion grants are two of five streams of government grants that we have supporting infrastructure improvement in delivering the BSBL reforms, and these two grants are focused on supporting obviously our youngest Victorians in their experience in early education from playdough and sand through to reading, writing, numbers and all the other exciting things that they are learning in these beautiful kindergartens.

In the case of improvement grants, these provide grants for upgrades as well as minor expansions of kindergartens or for IT equipment. They can be facility upgrades of up to \$750,000, or they can be minor refurbishments of up to \$150,000, and the IT grants are up to \$2000 to support IT equipment for administration or learning programs.

Since the Building Blocks improvement grant stream was launched in 2020 it has supported 268 infrastructure projects, which were valued at \$33.72 million, and 191 of these are complete so far, with the remaining in progress. In relation to the inclusion grants, in the case of these grants they are to upgrade buildings, improve facilities or purchase equipment to create a safe and inclusive environment for all children, and these include grants of up to \$200,000 to make kinder activities safer and more inclusive and accessible and grants of up to \$10,000 for movable inclusive education resources such as sensory equipment.

Since the Building Blocks inclusion grant stream was launched in 2020 it has supported 141 infrastructure projects valued at \$18.04 million, and 62 of these ones are complete and the remaining ones are in progress. This stream has also funded 726 equipment projects since 2020 to make educational environments more inclusive for children of all abilities. These programs, also to go to our earlier conversation about maternal and child health – and we might get to this later in the disability conversation – are really critical and just a demonstration of how it is business as usual for the Victorian government to ensure that at every level we are providing services that are inclusive and accessible for children.

Mathew HILAKARI: I would just be appreciative if you could go to the eligibility for these grants, if that is possible.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Yes. Building Blocks grants are available to be applied for by Victorian local government, a not-for-profit community organisation that is a legal entity, a Victorian government school or a Victorian non-government school registered with the VRQA. All of those types of organisations really are critical partners in our Best Start, Best Life reforms. For-profit organisations cannot apply for those grants within the Building Blocks stream.

Mathew HILAKARI: I did have one for-profit kinder respond to these grants, and we went through some of the explanations with them, so I appreciate the support that you have provided for that as well. I certainly know that the funds that are provided are often leveraged by councils as well in their kindergartens, because that can really help expand their ability to deliver some of these services locally. Could you run me, maybe, through some of the projects that we have been supporting?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Yes, sure. The improvement and inclusion grants are focused obviously on supporting our youngest Victorians in fit-for-purpose facilities and, as I said, on supporting access for all children. In the case of improvement grants, these provide grants for upgrades and minor expansions of kindergartens or for IT equipment, and kindergarten services apply for these grants for a range of purposes, from building and structural repairs and improvements through to the transformation of outdoor play spaces. These grants have been used to help transform outdoor play spaces at kinders by incorporating the natural landscape and also incorporating links to Indigenous culture and heritage, which has also been really important, and they have also delivered improved outdoor play spaces featuring early childhood learning requirements, making them accessible for all abilities.

The Orchard Road early learning centre is one example in Yan Yean. That was allocated \$77,809 to upgrade the outdoor space. In that instance the play yard was updated to make it more accessible and to encourage a wider variety of activities for children to support their learning.

Lauren KATHAGE: Good trampolines.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Yes, it was pretty cool. In 2021–22, \$45,000 was allocated to Thomson Kindergarten in Western Victoria to upgrade the existing bathroom. The existing bathroom was an open bathroom that needed some improvements in order to ensure that it was modernised and upgraded for physical access again for children of all abilities. Goodstart Early Learning in Traralgon has received the benefits of this stream as well, as Mr O'Brien might be interested to know. In 2022–23, \$500,000 was allocated to upgrade the outdoor area and refurbish the interior. That project was completed in November 2023 and delivered a full refurbishment of the regional early learning centre, supporting regional children and their families. I also went to the Goodstart Early Learning with the Premier and the Minister for Health in the Minister for Health's electorate. That was a beautiful outdoor space as well.

In relation to the inclusion grants stream, that provides funding to kindergartens to upgrade early childhood buildings and facilities, including playgrounds, and to purchase equipment to provide safe and more inclusive environments for children who have needs and different abilities. It can be used by services in a variety of ways to target the needs of the service. Some examples include Whittlesea Childcare and Early Learning Centre, which received \$172,000 to fund an inclusive nature-based outdoor play and learning space, with a quiet zone, native plant garden beds, a sandpit to make the sand pies and open-ended accessible play zones for children of all abilities to access with ease. That one was finished in June 2023. Goodstart Springvale South is another one, benefiting from \$8762 to purchase equipment to support children with speech delays and an outdoor sand and water starter set to create an inviting activity to assist children who might have sensory needs. In 2022–23, \$181,000 for Powlett Reserve Children's Centre and Kindergarten; in 2022–23 Middleton Drive early learning in Point Cook, as we know so well, benefited from \$9077 to support the purchase of resources and equipment for the sensory paths and balls et cetera. They are just a few of the examples, and I know everyone regularly visits these centres and is familiar with the ones in their own electorates. It really is delivering beautiful results across the state.

Mathew HILAKARI: I am really actually disappointed to hear that we had no playdough-specific grants, so I am going to give the bad news on Monday –

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Maybe we can look at that – or just give everyone the recipe.

Mathew HILAKARI: That would be a great thing for the Parliament to follow up. Now, just on the IT grants that you mention becoming more and more important for our kindergartens, even just signing in itself is an IT requirement. Can you go through some of those grants for us?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Yes. So they have funded 2007 IT projects since 2020. In the case of an information technology grant, applicants must demonstrate how their proposed purchase would be used for the educational benefits of the centre. But, yes, they are critical as well.

Danny O'BRIEN: I am just wondering, before we finish, Mr O'Kelly, did you get a timeline on that client services report? You were going to check with the Deputy Secretary.

Danny O'KELLY: Sorry, I have forgotten –

Danny O'BRIEN: There was a review you were going to undertake on the client services issue.

Danny O'KELLY: Paying for drug tests through client services?

Danny O'BRIEN: No, no. It was the review of client expenses, sorry, not client services.

Danny O'KELLY: So the fact that that is paid for from client expenses?

Danny O'BRIEN: No, no. The question was the department had said you were going to undertake a review of client expenses and how they were done and you were going to get an answer from –

Peta McCAMMON: I have just got something through saying we will have to take it on notice.

Danny O'BRIEN: Okay. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr O'Brien.

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.

I do just want to take a moment to acknowledge that some of the conversations today people in the room or listening or watching the live broadcast may have found distressing. There is support available. Bravehearts supports adult survivors of child sexual abuse, and the info and support line can be reached on 1800 272 831. If your child or another child is in a situation that is life-threatening, please ring Victoria Police. To report concerns about the immediate safety of a child after hours, call the after-hours child protection emergency service on 13 12 78.

The committee is going to take a very short break before beginning its consideration of the disability portfolio at 7 pm.

I declare this hearing adjourned.

Witnesses withdrew.