

Public Accounts and Estimates Committee  
Inquiry into the 2024–25 Budget Estimates  
24 May 2024

**PORTFOLIO: Children**

**Witnesses:**

- The Hon. Lizzie Blandthorn MP
- Mr. Danny O’Kelly
- Mr. Euan Wallace
- Ms. Peta McCammon
- Ms. Jenny Atta PSM
- Ms. Bronwen FitzGerald

**QUESTIONS ON NOTICE**

**QUESTION 1**

**How many current residential care workers received an exemption from mandatory minimum qualifications?**

**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.

*Hearing Transcript, p. 5*

Name of Committee members asking question: Danny O’Brien

**RESPONSE**

**Answer:**

The minimum qualification requirements require all residential care workers providing direct care in a department operated, or funded residential care home, must hold or be undertaking, either:

- Certificate IV in Child, Youth and Family Intervention (preferred); or
- A recognised relevant qualification including Diploma or Degree level in a relevant field.

In addition, all residential care workers must complete three mandatory units of competency, in areas including working in residential care, providing trauma informed care, and facilitating responsible behaviour.

Timeframes for completion of a qualification are prescribed by the tertiary institution or the vocational education training provider.

Training in the mandatory units of competency must have commenced prior to providing direct care to a child or young person in residential care, and be completed within 12 weeks of commencement. Given they involve workplace-based learning, activities and assessment, they must be completed after commencement of work.

### **Exceptional Circumstances**

Residential care service providers may allow a residential care worker to provide direct care for a strictly time limited arrangement prior to the commencement of training.

To provide necessary safeguards, any exceptional circumstance must:

- Be time-limited and align with the date of the next available training in the mandatory units of competency.
- Demonstrate all options for commencing the minimum qualification and mandatory units of competency have been exhausted.
- Include an assessment that shows that the worker's skills, capabilities, previous experience and training align with the learning outcomes of the mandatory unit of competency.
- Include a strategy to provide additional supports for the residential care worker whilst providing direct care to a child or young person until they have commenced training in the minimum qualification and/or mandatory units of competency.

The exceptional circumstances approval process is managed by the residential care provider. The residential care providers are required to report it to the department. As at 29 May 2024, there are 10 exceptional circumstances known to the department.

## **QUESTION 2**

### **2024-25 indexation rate for carers allowance**

**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.

*Hearing Transcript, p. 13*

**Name of Committee members asking question: Danny O'Brien**

### **RESPONSE**

**Answer:**

Funding for the care allowance is provided from base funding for Child Protection and Family Services.

**QUESTION 3****Review of administration of client expenses funding**

**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?**

*Hearing Transcript, p. 13*

**Name of Committee members asking question: Danny O'Brien**

**RESPONSE****Answer:**

DFFH is currently progressing a range of activities relating to supports for children and young people and their carers, including client expenses funding. This includes:

- Collaboration with key sector partners on opportunities to reform and improve home-based care, including through a collaborative working group established at the request of the Minister for Children in July 2023.
- Working with the Commonwealth and other States and Territories as part of Community Services Ministers forum to progress the Safe and Supported First Action Plan, which includes a key action around reviewing carer supports. This work is in the planning stage and is expected to progress across 2024 and 2025.

**QUESTION 4****Client expenses funding of parental drug tests**

**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

*Hearing Transcript, p. 14*

**Name of Committee members asking question: Danny O'Brien**

**RESPONSE****Answer:**

Client expenses funding is intended to be flexible and responsive to the different needs and circumstances of children and young people and their carers.

For example, it may be used to meet costs associated with school, medical, transport and child care costs, as well as costs of facilitating contact with parents and family members as provided for in the case plan.

Child Protection makes decisions regarding client expenses funding. This is based on a range of considerations including:

- The individual needs and circumstances of the child or young person, as reflected in their case and care plan
- Whether the cost is extraordinary (i.e. beyond the day-to-day costs of providing care)
- The individual circumstances of the carer, including whether the cost would represent an unreasonable financial burden
- Any alternative funding sources available.

## QUESTION 5

### Allocation of funding to support the implementation of the Statement of Recognition Act

**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.

*Hearing Transcript, p. 19-20*

Name of Committee members asking question: Aiv Puglielli

## RESPONSE

### Answer:

Implementation of the *Statement of Recognition Act* (2023) (the Act) will be delivered across multiple initiatives and reforms for Aboriginal children and families by 1 July 2024 and beyond. Initial implementation of the Act aims to embed the Statement of Recognition, binding recognition principles (binding principles), and the Aboriginal Child Placement Principles into child protection and funded agency policy and practice guidance to ensure workforce readiness for 1 July 2024.

The Statement of Recognition Act includes a set of binding principles which requires the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing and community service organisations to apply an Aboriginal lens to decisions made relating to an Aboriginal children or family through the child protection system. Implementation of the binding principles and the Aboriginal Child Placement Principles will be completed through ongoing revisions to child protection training, manual, the child protection risk assessment framework, and enhancements to the child protection client recording system and reports that support applications to the Children's Court. These activities will be funded from the Department's existing resources.

**QUESTION 6**

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

**Nick McGOWAN:** ...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.

*Hearing Transcript, p. 8-9*

**Name of Committee members asking question: Nick McGowan**

**RESPONSE**

In 2023, 2,416 services offered a 15-hour Three-Year-Old Kindergarten program. This equates to 80.8% of the 2,989 services.

Of the 67,413 children enrolled in Three-Year-Old Kindergarten in 2023, there were 48,989 children enrolled in a 15-hour program. This equates to 72.7% of eligible children receiving a 15 hour Three-Year-Old Kindergarten program.

These results build on other positive results relating to the state-wide roll-out of 5 to 15 hours of Three-Year-Old Kindergarten in 2023. In that year, Three-Year-Old Kindergarten hours averaged 13.1 across the State, while enrolments increased by 11.5% to 67,413.

These results indicate strong uptake of the reform by parents and carers, as well as the sector's capacity to deliver these hours. This is due to the Victorian Government funding and practical assistance that has helped to grow infrastructure and workforce capacity, and to support services through programming and change management decisions.