

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the 2023–24 Budget Estimates

Melbourne – Wednesday 14 June 2023

MEMBERS

Sarah Connolly – Chair

Nicholas McGowan – Deputy Chair

Michael Galea

Paul Hamer

Mathew Hilakari

Lauren Kathage

Bev McArthur

Danny O’Brien

Ellen Sandell

WITNESSES

Ms Ingrid Stitt MLC, Minister for Early Childhood and Pre-Prep,

Ms Jenny Atta, Secretary,

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

Ms Kim Little, Deputy Secretary, Early Childhood Education,

Ms Jessica Trinder, Executive Director, Asset Management and Strategy, Victorian School Building Authority, and

Ms Kylie White, Deputy Secretary, Policy Strategy and Performance, Department of Education.

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

I ask that mobile telephones now be turned to silent.

On behalf of the Parliament, the committee is conducting this Inquiry into the 2023–24 Budget Estimates. The committee's aim is to scrutinise public administration and finance to improve outcomes for the Victorian community.

I advise that all evidence taken by the committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. However, comments repeated outside 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 us this afternoon via the live stream and other committee members.

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

I welcome the Minister for Early Childhood and Pre-Prep the Honourable Ingrid Stitt as well as officials from the Department of Education. Minister, I am going to invite you to make an opening statement or presentation of no more than 5 minutes, and committee members will then ask questions.

Visual presentation.

Ingrid STITT: Thank you very much, Chair, and thank you, committee members, for the opportunity to appear before you today. I acknowledge the traditional owners of the lands we meet on, and I pay my respects to elders past and present.

This budget kickstarts the next phase of Victoria's transformation of early childhood education. Building on the \$4.4 billion we have already invested in our Best Start, Best Life reforms, this budget provides a further \$1.8 billion to continue free kinder; begin the transition to pre-prep from 2025; build, expand and upgrade kindergarten infrastructure; continue the rollout of three-year-old kinder; and provide grants, programs and other supports to improve early childhood services and make them more inclusive. These investments will ease cost-of-living pressures for Victorian families and help around 26,000 parents to return to work if they choose, giving our economy a \$1.5 billion boost. This budget is about improving the lifelong outcomes of Victorian children.

This government has provided record funding to transform early childhood education back to our teachers, educators and the services that employ them. As you can see in this graph, our average annual investment is over eight times what the sector was receiving under the previous government. Victoria now provides the most funding per child of any state. Victoria is leading the nation in access to early childhood education. We are the only state providing universal three-year-old kinder and one of only two states committed to pre-prep for four-year-olds.

The budget provides a further \$546.4 million for the continued delivery and expansion of Best Start, Best Life, including continuing the rollout of three-year-old kinder towards a statewide offer of 15 hours by 2029; locking

in free kinder, which will benefit up to 140,000 children this year and save families up to \$2500 per child every year; and beginning the transition from four-year-old kinder to pre-prep by 2032. This funding also improves cultural safety and inclusion by supporting Aboriginal community organisations and traditional owners to work with early childhood services and will continue to support and retain our current workforce and attract the workforce of the future.

This budget will ensure we continue to build the infrastructure we need to support our expanded early childhood education offer. We will provide a further \$1.2 billion to build, expand and improve kindergarten infrastructure. This builds on the \$1.5 billion infrastructure investment we provided last year to help deliver our Best Start, Best Life reforms. This means we can build 35 of our new government owned and operated early learning centres; the first four will open in 2025. It will also help build or upgrade around 145 kinders on or near school sites, making the transition to school easier and ending the double drop-off for parents.

The budget also invests a further \$10 million in Building Blocks improvement grants for upgrades, refurbishments and renovations to existing early learning facilities. This budget continues our significant investment in early childhood infrastructure projects. Since 2019–20 we have invested more than \$545.7 million across 878 projects to give services the modern facilities they need. This includes more than 240 capacity-building projects, ensuring that families can access a high-quality kinder program close to home. This budget provides \$20.2 million to provide every kindergarten service in the state, with access to \$5000 grants for new toys and equipment; to establish eight new toy libraries and support existing libraries; and to fund 150 bush kinder programs per year. There is also \$23.9 million to continue our hugely successful early childhood language program, while \$3.7 million will establish 10 additional bilingual kinders. All Victorian children should be able to access two years of high-quality play-based learning, and that is why this budget invests \$18.1 million to support children with disability, developmental delays and complex medical needs to access, attend and thrive at kinder. Importantly this includes funding to pilot new ways to support these children and their families to best engage with and benefit from kindergarten.

I want to finish by thanking everyone working across our sector for making these reforms possible. I am really proud to be delivering the next phase of our reforms through this budget. It is a very exciting time for early childhood education in our state.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, Minister. I am going to go to the Deputy Chair for the next 14 minutes.

Nicholas McGOWAN: Thank you. Thank you, Minister, for your presentation. My question is in respect to the kindergarten participation rate, and I can see it is 91.6 per cent, which means it has fallen again. Do you know how many children, in actual numbers, were eligible but did not attend in 2022?

Ingrid STITT: Thank you for that question, Mr McGowan. The BP3 reported enrolments for 2022 were 76,389 children, and that participation rate, as you said, is 91.6 per cent. That is holding relatively steadily with the 2021 rate. Our four-year-old kinder participation rate remains very strong and is broadly consistent. Naturally the number of funded enrolments can fluctuate in line with the kindergarten-aged population. One of the factors I think is that 2022 saw the population of Victorians in the year before school slightly decline. It is important to note that when we are determining Victoria's four-year-old kindergarten participation rate we are relying on ABS data, which at any point in time is not a precise science. But of course we are absolutely committed to removing any barrier to participation, which is why we have invested in a very targeted way around making sure that some of the children that might have barriers have those barriers removed. I am talking about areas such as ensuring that children with additional needs or a developmental delay have additional support so that they can access kinder. Of course free kinder is an absolute game changer in terms of removing financial barriers for families to be able to enrol their children in a quality kindergarten program.

We have also got some quite targeted programs aimed at making sure that culturally and linguistically diverse communities can also access kinder. I am very proud of the fact that we have continued to see really strong participation rates of Aboriginal children in Victoria, which are actually above the state average, and I think this is a result of, you know, very intensive work with a number of the peak organisations representing Aboriginal kindergarten services and families. It is really a demonstration that when we target on-the-ground programs in the right areas, we can really lift participation, so I am very confident that we will continue to see very strong percentages in Victoria. I am absolutely committed to that. The three-year-old participation rate is a really good news story. I think it really demonstrates that families have really seen the benefit of sending their children to

three-year-old kinder, so I am really keen to continue to drive that participation rate up as we continue to roll out our reforms in the area of three-year-old kinder.

Nicholas McGOWAN: And do you have actual numbers in terms of those figures? I know they were presented as percentages.

Ingrid STITT: What I can indicate to you is that our three-year-old participation rate in 2022 was 60,455 funded three-year-old kindergarten enrolments, and that is an incredibly strong result. I think that our target that we have set is 47,000, so we are already off to a really good start there. With Koori children's participation, in 2022 the number of Aboriginal children enrolled in four-year-old kinder increased by 241. So we had 1738 Aboriginal children enrolled in 2021. Just one little proviso I would make about those figures is that because we have now introduced free kinder, not everybody might be self-reporting that they identify as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. But notwithstanding that, it is still a great result. It is really strong, and it has recovered significantly since COVID.

Nicholas McGOWAN: And those figures – can we also get the breakdown obviously between the difference between three-year-old and four-year-old kinder? Is that possible?

Ingrid STITT: Yes, of course.

Kim LITTLE: That information is represented in BP3 as well.

Nicholas McGOWAN: That would be great.

Kim LITTLE: Those figures are presented in the results that are reported in the budget.

Nicholas McGOWAN: Thank you. And this is not a question I have got here, but it was just prompted by the slide there – do we know where the bilingual kindergartens will be based at this point or not?

Ingrid STITT: We have not made the decision yet about where the additional 10 will be. The department will be working on the criteria for that work. Again, this is a program that I think is really popular and really important. I think we have got close to 8000 children now participating in a language program within our kindergartens. We have got a number of Aboriginal languages that are being taught. We have got a range of other languages. It is also a great opportunity for bilingual kindergarten staff to, you know, have employment opportunities doing what they love, and we are very committed to continuing the strong support for the CALD community. We have already got 10 bilingual kinders, and I think we are building on that through this budget allocation.

Nicholas McGOWAN: Thank you, Minister. Minister, you might be able to assist me with this question, but if not, I am only too happy to hear from anyone else. I am talking in respect to the performance measure for children funded to participate in Early Start Kindergarten, which is available to children known to child protection. I am keen to understand what percentage of children known to child protection attended kindergarten in 2022. That is quite granular, I know.

Ingrid STITT: Yes. In 2022–23 there were 4000 children enrolled in early start kinder, and that is an improvement on the 2021–22 figures. There are a range of other supports that are provided – I have mentioned a couple of them already – to help vulnerable children enrol and remain engaged in kindergarten, and that includes our program for children in out-of-home care and those children known to child protection through the early childhood Lookout program. So we will continue to make sure that all children, including our most vulnerable, are supported to attend kinder.

I think another important reform that we will be delivering is in the rollout of pre-prep. We are giving early access to 30 hours of pre-prep to children who are vulnerable who might be in out-of-home care. Also, Aboriginal children will get early access to up to 30 hours of pre-prep, and in addition to that the children of asylum seekers and refugees have that early access in 2026. In 2028 we will provide up to 30 hours of pre-prep access to children whose parents are on a Commonwealth concession card. So it is really something that we focus very closely on, and in all of our reforms we are constantly looking at ways that we can support the most vulnerable children in our community, because we know that they are the children who will benefit the most from a universal kinder offering.

Nicholas McGOWAN: Forgive my ignorance, Minister. When a child protection child is enrolled but does not attend do you not put the processes there in terms of the follow-up? How does that actually work?

Ingrid STITT: Yes. I am going to ask my Deputy Secretary Ms Little to give you a bit of a sense of how our department works with other departments when it comes to children who are vulnerable.

Kim LITTLE: Absolutely. Thank you very much, Minister. For children who are known to child protection, with a subset of those children being children in out-of-home care, because the category is actually broader than that, not only are there differential funding arrangements available for them but they were able to access 15 hours of free three-year-old kindergarten even before that became a universal entitlement across the state. We work very closely with our colleagues in the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing and those services and also a range of other stakeholders through an out-of-home care agreement that we have with the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare and so on, and we work with individual services as well in order to support enrolment but also attendance of those children at the service.

One of the things the committee might be interested in is that as part of the preschool reform agreement, which is the national funding agreement that is in place with the Commonwealth where they help contribute to the cost of preschool and the year before school, we have agreed as a state that we are going to move to collecting attendance data systematically at the state level from 2025 and beyond. One of the things that will allow us to do is that in addition to providing services with equity funding – what we call school readiness funding – which can help them support the inclusion and attendance of these children at a service, we will also have more reliable data available to us about the attendance of all children.

Nicholas McGOWAN: Sorry, just to get to the question: in terms of the process, do you know what process is followed if I have got a child that does not come to kinder this morning or to care? Can you talk me through that? I do not understand how it works.

Kim LITTLE: What services will do if a child does not attend, particularly a vulnerable child, which is the cohort that you are asking about, is that they will contact the family and have a conversation with them about what is going on. Obviously if the child is in out-of-home care then they are with a kinship care arrangement, but many children known to child protection of course are still with their families of birth, they are just being supported in a whole variety of ways by DFFH, so they will get in touch with the family.

Nicholas McGOWAN: So presently we do not capture that absence – is that what you are saying? In the future we are looking to?

Kim LITTLE: The service captures that absence – absolutely – and the service is required to do that. The service needs to know what children are attending at their service under the national law, which is the law that governs and regulates early childhood education and care in Victoria. Services are absolutely required to record children attending or not attending. What we have not had here in Victoria historically, at any point in history, is that at the sessional kindergarten service level we have not had systematic collection of that attendance data. One of the things I am pleased to tell the committee that we have been funded for and that we have as a project to be in place by 2025 is a new attendance system that will collect data from sessional kindergartens. In the long day care space, that is collected by the Commonwealth, but absolutely the service records the attendance of children.

Nicholas McGOWAN: So if in 2025 the minister turns to you and says, ‘I want to know of the kids in protection whether they’re turning up,’ you will be able to answer the question for the minister at that point.

Ingrid STITT: Yes. We have got work going on so that we will be able to improve the data that we hold.

Kim LITTLE: Yes, absolutely, which will then allow us to have more detailed conversations with services, look at that data, tailor our supports around how that attendance will –

Nicholas McGOWAN: Is the goal for the start of 2025, or potentially do we have –

Kim LITTLE: The commitment is that it is rolled out across the course of 2025.

Ingrid STITT: It is part of the Commonwealth funding agreement that all states and territories have got. I mean, we are not all one size fits all, because the systems can vary quite significantly from state to state in how

kindergarten is delivered and administered and to what extent the state is a sort of steward of the system or an active participant in service delivery. Not everybody's PRAs are the same, but there is an agreement across the board with the Commonwealth that this is an area – attendance – that we will be focused on over the next couple of years. The only sensitivity, I think, with this is that we have always got to remember that kindergarten is not a compulsory part of our education system. Of course we want really high attendance, because we know the amazing benefits children get from early childhood education, but it is not compulsory, so there is a very important need to not be punitive about attendance. But when you are talking about vulnerable children, as you have asked about, Mr McGowan, it is really a big focus for the department to be able to build up their capacity to understand that data, and more importantly, it is not just about having the data, it is actually responding in a way that is going to make a difference. I am really confident that there are strong links between the Department of Education and the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing to make sure that that work continues in a very forensic way.

Nicholas McGOWAN: Thank you.

Kim LITTLE: I can also assure you that services themselves take this extremely seriously, and they are supported by our early childhood Lookout program as well, to support children to enrol and attend.

Nicholas McGOWAN: Thank you.

Bev McARTHUR: I will continue, Ms Little. With regard to the early childhood workforce shortages, how many early childhood teacher and educator vacancies need to be filled?

The CHAIR: Apologies for interrupting, Mrs McArthur. The time has expired. We are going to go to Ms Kathage.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you, Chair, Minister and officials. I want to ask about budget paper 3, page 22. The kindergarten infrastructure funding is set out there. Are you able to explain how the infrastructure funding is supporting the Best Start, Best Life reform across the state?

Ingrid STITT: Thank you for that question. This is a really critical part of our reform agenda. We want to make sure that we are rolling out a significant transformation of early childhood education. As I know, you are a very passionate supporter of that in your community in a growth corridor where many, many young families are moving in and looking at what their kindergarten options are. We know that 90 per cent of a child's brain develops before the age of five and early education has such a profound impact on the way that children develop and grow. I think that is universally accepted. I do not think we need to continue to have the debate about the value of early childhood education. It is now about making sure that we are embedding it in our education system, and we are very proud to be delivering two years of play-based learning before school.

Part of the reform is rolling out 15 hours of kinder for every three-year-old in Victoria by 2029. This is something that our department and government have been working on for a number of years now. We are also doubling the hours of four-year-old kinder through pre-prep. In effect this means that instead of getting 600 hours of kinder in the year before school, by 2032 every child in the state will have access to 1800 hours of kindergarten in the year before school. So it is incredibly important reform; we know that that bigger dose of quality kindergarten is going to make such a huge difference to how children transition to primary school. We do need to work on a significant new expanded and upgraded infrastructure right across the state to support these reforms. I am really pleased that in this year's state budget we have invested an additional \$1.2 billion to build the early childhood infrastructure needed to support these reforms, and that is on top of the \$1.5 billion that we provided last year as part of the Victorian economic and fiscal update. This is really all about supporting those big reforms that I have already touched on. By building new kindergartens and improving and expanding the learning environment of existing kinders, we are making sure that children right across the state, regardless of whether they are in the city or in a regional city or in rural Victoria, can access and learn in a modern, fit-for-purpose environment and get that fantastic start to their education. Funding allocated in this year's budget will continue those three main streams of work. That is delivering new and expanded kinders on or near our schools sites, something that is incredibly popular for practical – juggling work and family – reasons. I only wish that when my children were little I had the option of having a one-stop drop. But we are really pleased with how this kindergarten-on-school-site reform is going, and we are going to continue to do that. We will be building the first 35 of the government owned and operated early learning centres and – this is

an important one – improving and upgrading existing kinders. Part of the rollout of three-year-old kinder means that we need to ensure and we have a policy to deliver a new kinder on every school site – every new school that we build.

We are planning and building new kinders at existing government schools as well, based on an assessment that the department makes on the particular needs of a local government area. We have already delivered 21 kindergartens on new and existing school sites across Victoria, and we will be delivering another 10 in 2024 – so 21 this year and 10 next year. New kinders next to school sites have also been delivered in partnership with local government in a number of different areas across the state. As part of this year's budget we have funded the delivery of around 145 new and upgraded facilities across the state on school sites, and we have committed to that including low-fee-paying non-government school sites, so we are going to be massively expanding this program.

It continues the important work of making sure that education is more accessible for families, with easy drop-off times. But I think one of the real benefits that I have witnessed in my travels when I have gone out and visited a number of kinders on school sites is the difference it is making with the professional relationships that are being built between the kindergarten teachers and educators and the teachers in the primary school, and that is really enhancing the way that individual children's plans to transition to primary school are improved. It is not just about parents having to ditch that double drop-off, which is one of the amazing benefits of it, but it is also about the benefits to children as they transition to primary school.

Having kinders and schools together also means that in some circumstances we are able to add those community services and wraparound services at the kinder on the school site, whether that is maternal and child health or other health services. They are very popular, those models. They are not possible everywhere, because not always do you have the land available, but where all of those things align and there is good cooperation with our partners in local government we have been able to deliver those hubs with a kinder and in some circumstances with a long day care centre on a school site. We want to make sure that our investment also enables us to continue new modular kindergarten projects each year to meet demand, and again this is about making the most of our budget investments. Modular kinders can be delivered on land owned by the state, but we are delivering them on other sites for third parties as well. They are a very efficient way to meet the growing demand for the number of kindergarten infrastructure projects, and they are beautiful.

Lauren KATHAGE: They are – Eucalyptus Parade in Donnybrook.

Ingrid STITT: We have been out to a couple already together, Ms Kathage, and I know you know that they are quality builds. These are Victorian companies that we are procuring these builds from. They are doing an amazing job. Since 2019 we have delivered 18 modular kindergarten projects, and we have got a further 13 projects to be delivered ahead of 2024. It makes the delivery and the certainty for communities just so much more streamlined.

Nicholas McGOWAN: What is the difference in them, Minister? Sorry to interrupt.

Ingrid STITT: Sorry, I am –

Nicholas McGOWAN: You have not got time.

Ingrid STITT: Sorry. I did not hear you.

Nicholas McGOWAN: What is the difference in the modular?

The CHAIR: Apologies, Mr McGowan.

Nicholas McGOWAN: Informal question – I am just interested.

The CHAIR: I appreciate you may be interested.

Lauren KATHAGE: I am happy to chat to you about it afterwards, Mr McGowan. I have got some photos. I will show you.

Ingrid STITT: Perhaps I can talk to you about that offline when we are back in the upper house, Mr McGowan. I am happy to do that.

Nicholas McGOWAN: Please do.

Ingrid STITT: It is a good program.

Also, planning and consultation has commenced with local communities, local governments and other stakeholders for the first four of the 50 early learning centres that we have committed to delivering. So we will be delivering the first four in 2025, and all 50 will be delivered by 2028. The successful implementation of Best Start, Best Life reforms also relies on existing infrastructure capacity being maintained and continuing to offer kinder services. So we have got a lot of, for example, standalone sessional kinders that I know will be applying for one of our many Building Blocks grants. There is a number of different streams that are available for kindergarten services, including capacity-building grants, because we know that some of the existing kinders will need an upgrade to be able to accommodate the additional hours in both four-year-old and three-year-old.

We have, in the budget, got \$10 million invested to deliver another round of the Building Blocks improvement grants, which I know are very popular. I think the figures that I have recently received from the Victorian School Building Authority indicate that since 2015 we have delivered over 8000 kindergarten projects, so they are becoming a kindergarten infrastructure machine in at the Victorian School Building Authority. And that is very important because we know we need that additional capacity.

Kindergartens that are looking to modernise and upgrade the functionality of their existing buildings is another important area of investment. So we are building, upgrading and improving kinders right across the state, delivering those facilities that children need. I think the other feedback that I get when I go and visit some of these projects is the difference it makes to the working, planning and delivery of education programs for our teachers and educators. So having a kind of modern, fit-for-purpose building really does make a difference to the quality of their programs and the collaboration between teachers and educators.

There are a number of different projects I know that we will be able to visit in your community, Ms Kathage. I know that we have got a very good working relationship with the local government authority in your part of Melbourne. We have got that very important partnership approach with local government right across the state when it comes to infrastructure for kinder projects. We know that it is incredibly important to continue to work closely with local government. We really value the role that they play not only in the delivery of high-quality kindergarten services in a range of different parts of the state, but also they have many, many assets across the state that they are responsible for and that they lease to kindergarten providers. So we have got a strong infrastructure focus on working out what the forward demand is in each local government area for kinder places and working closely with local government to come up with an in-principle agreement about what are the priority projects that need to be delivered in this area to meet the demands of not only our reform but the number of places that will be needed based on population data and so on in a particular area.

We are very proud of the infrastructure program that we have been embarking on and that will continue at pace as a result of the investment that we have made in this budget.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you, Minister. I think it was only two weeks ago I went to the opening of an early learning centre – Marymede Early Learning Centre in Doreen – so it was good that there is choice provided to families for where they want their children to be educated. You mentioned earlier the 50 government owned and operated early learning centres. How will they be delivered? What will be the delivery model for local communities?

Ingrid STITT: Thank you. Obviously the government understands the importance of being able to access affordable early learning education for Victorian families. We know that for too many families it has just been really difficult to either find a childcare place or make the economics of that childcare arrangement work for them and their families. I think you probably have heard me and other ministers and the Premier talk extensively about how this is about not only the benefits for children but the potential to unlock workforce participation, particularly amongst women who may have been locked out of participating in the workforce because of the cost of child care.

Now, I think it is important to just always remember that child care and long day care are fundamentally a responsibility of the Commonwealth. The Victorian government's responsibilities are in the kindergarten programs that are delivered, including within those long day care centres, but we have seen a need. We understand that there are particular parts of our state that have not been able to provide the places that the community needs, and so we have stepped into this space, which has traditionally been the remit of the Commonwealth government and will continue to need to be. But I think that unfortunately under the previous federal government we saw very much a hands-off approach when it came to the early childhood sector, and I am pleased that we have already started some very positive discussions with the Albanese federal government about how they can play their role in supporting the childcare sector now.

Lauren KATHAGE: Looking forward to July 1.

Ingrid STITT: Yes, that is right. So the 50 government owned and operated early learning centres were a centrepiece of our Best Start, Best Life reforms because we saw the need there. We have been able to announce the first 30 locations. The first four have been announced and will be delivered in 2025. Up to another 26 have been announced in the SA2 area, but my department and the VSBA are currently going through a process of consulting with local government and the community and also existing service providers in those areas to nail down the exact location of those additional 26 that we have announced. We are very mindful of the need to have strong criteria around how they are chosen and where they are located. We do not want to be disturbing existing providers, so we are genuinely looking for those areas where we know that there are not enough childcare places available, and that can vary. That can be in growth areas because the market just cannot keep up, or it can be in, let us say, a rural area where the market has just not seen fit to invest in that part of the state. We do not want to see people miss out on sending their children to a quality early learning environment based on these childcare deserts that we know exist, and there has been quite extensive research into this that I am sure you are familiar with given your constituency.

So we are really excited about the opportunities that government owned and operated early learning centres are going to provide us with. We are keen to not only deliver the infrastructure associated with those projects but also consult very closely with the sector and with representatives of the workforce to make sure that we get the employment model right as well. You would be absolutely familiar, I am sure, with the fact that historically in the childcare sector this is work that is dominated by women and has historically not been recognised adequately and has a significant gender pay gap issue when you think about other industries that might compare. We are serious about tackling those issues, and this is one of the ways that we are going to do that.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you, Minister.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. The next 5 minutes are going to Ms Sandell.

Ellen SANDELL: Thank you, Chair. I am not sure which official this is for, so whoever it is for, please take it. I just want to also ask about the bilingual kinders. You have said there is no decision yet on where the additional 10 will be. I just wanted to check: will it be a similar application process to the last round – so kinders actually put forward if they want the program – or is there a different process for these ones?

Jenny ATTA: I think that is still in design, Ms Sandell, but Ms Little might be able to –

Kim LITTLE: We will be announcing the approach. The approach we have used previously, as you flagged, is that we have asked for applications that have come from services themselves.

Ellen SANDELL: So that has already happened, are you saying, or you will go out to ask?

Kim LITTLE: For the future. The exact details of how that will work obviously –

Ellen SANDELL: I am just wondering: if kinders in my electorate want to apply, can they still apply for those or put forward an expression of interest, or is it a different process?

Ingrid STITT: I think it would be fair to say that the approach we took with the initial tranche of bilingual kinders is going to be a very similar approach to what we take for this funding allocation. There will be opportunities for expressions of interest to be put forward to the department. Obviously the department will assess each of those applications on its merits.

Ellen SANDELL: Of course. And is that similar for the bush kinders? I know there are 150 extra bush kinder programs. Has it been decided where they are, or will that be a similar thing where kinders can put in an expression of interest?

Ingrid STITT: Yes. Again, the absolute detail of the process for the application and awarding of those grants has not been announced yet. But this is a massive expansion of the number of kinder programs that we are already delivering, so I think it is going to be very well received. We have got some amazing examples of bush kinder already. We are keen to expand it – 150 a year is a significant bump in the number of kinders providing bush kinder.

Ellen SANDELL: Obviously it will take a little while to roll out, but do you have any sense of a time line on that – when kinders should be looking – because obviously kinders are planning now for what they might do in the next few years.

Ingrid STITT: I think I would be being accurate in saying that the department is very proactive about communicating directly with kinders about all of the different supports that the government provides and also notifying them of grant rounds that they are eligible to apply for, so we will take a similar approach. We have also got the very regular consultative forums that we meet with – and I attend those meetings as well – associated with the rollout of these reforms. A lot of peak bodies sit on the task force, so we would be making sure that we would be communicating the details of how kinders can get their applications in.

Ellen SANDELL: No specific time line just yet?

Ingrid STITT: It will not be very far off. I do not want to leave the impression that it is going to be a long time. We want to get these programs out the door.

Ellen SANDELL: Yes. I am just asking because I know some of my kinders will be interested.

Ingrid STITT: Yes.

Ellen SANDELL: And I want to make sure they get the information.

Ingrid STITT: Happy to keep you in the loop about that.

Ellen SANDELL: Just in terms of the rollout of pre-prep, obviously a very significant reform and very welcome, some communities, though, particularly across Melbourne, will not be getting it until 2030, 2031 or 2032 for most of them. Obviously, kids now will not get it, and then kids have to be born in five years time to be able to get the benefits of it. Can you talk about why there is such a long lead time? I know there are workforce challenges, but just in terms of how you chose communities to go first. Obviously in my electorate we have some very advantaged areas but also some very disadvantaged areas with public housing, for example.

Ingrid STITT: I will try and be succinct because I am looking at the clock and I know you have got limited time, but there are three key things here. The first is that we have got to have the infrastructure and the workforce ready, and we need, we estimate, about 11,000 new teachers and educators to deliver on these reforms. We have to have the time, given it is a four-year degree to be bachelor qualified, to build that pipeline of teachers and educators. The infrastructure is the other key thing. In some parts of metropolitan Melbourne we are either landlocked and have got those constraints or, in growth corridors, it is just the keeping up with the demand, and having the time and the investment is important in that regard.

The other issue is we took the same approach as we did with three-year-old, and you will remember with three-year-old we rolled out geographically – in regional Vic first, and then we kind of built on that as we went. We have taken a similar approach for pre-prep rollout because it, frankly, worked really well with the sector.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Ms Sandell, Minister and department officials. That is the end of questions for this session.

Thank you very much for appearing before the committee this afternoon. The committee will now follow up on any questions taken on notice in writing, and responses are required within five working days of the committee's request. The committee is now going to take a short break before beginning its consideration of the small business portfolio at 3:20 pm.

I declare this hearing adjourned.

Witnesses withdrew.