

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the 2023–24 Budget Estimates

Melbourne – Thursday 15 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 Lizzie Blandthorn MLC, Minister for Child Protection and Family Services,

Ms Peta McCammon, Secretary,

Ms Raylene Harradine, Deputy Secretary, Aboriginal Self-determination and Outcomes,

Ms Annette Lancy, Acting Deputy Secretary, Children and Families, and

Mr Danny O'Kelly, Deputy Secretary, Community Operations and Practice Leadership, 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 now please 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 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 today 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 Child Protection and Family Services the Honourable Lizzie Blandthorn and officers from the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing. Minister, I am going to invite you to make an opening statement or presentation of no more than 5 minutes, and this will be followed by questions from the committee. Your time starts now.

Visual presentation.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Thank you very much, Chair, and thank you to the committee for the opportunity to present on the child protection and family services portfolio. Can I also begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we are meeting today and pay my respect to elders past and present.

We want every child and young person to be safe and secure in a loving home; to be connected to their family, their culture and their community; and to have access to the services and experiences that enable them to develop and thrive. This government has consistently invested in services and reforms to strengthen our child protection and family services system, to keep families together and to protect the best interests of all children. As you can see from this graph, this government has more than doubled the overall funding invested in the child protection and family services portfolio in less than 10 years, from \$847 million in 2014–15 to more than \$2 billion in 2023–24.

Beginning with the *Roadmap for Reform: Strong Families, Safe Children* we are transforming the children and families system across the spectrum, from early help through to continuing care and supporting our care leavers. We seek to work with the sector to identify what is needed next, to increase earlier intervention and to make services more accessible, coordinated and effective. This budget is key to delivering the next phase of reform and invests across the children and families system from early help family services through to Housing First for young people leaving residential care. It will increase early intervention, reduce the number of children in statutory child protection, address the over-representation of Aboriginal children in out-of-home care and improve outcomes for children and young people who need it the most.

Since 2014 we have funded an additional 1180 child protection practitioners. We are committed to building capacity and capability in the child protection workforce. We are doing this through creating a pipeline of new

child protection practitioners and providing support and development for our existing child protection practitioners. For the pipeline we are continuing to deliver the child protection vacation employment program and invest in international recruitment. We also relaunched the successful Go Where You're Needed and the Jobs that Matter recruitment campaigns. For our existing practitioners we have invested \$1.4 million since 2020 to deliver learning and development programs and \$1.2 million of ongoing annual funding to deliver counselling, wellbeing training and incident debriefing sessions to our workforce.

This next graph shows the growth in family services investment since 2012–13. The Victorian government has more than tripled family services funding from \$120 million per annum in 2012–13 to more than \$398 million per annum in 2023–24. Our investments over recent budgets are directly benefiting children, young people and their families in Victoria. You can see from the slide some of the areas where we have focused our attention and how many families have been supported. Since July 2022 over 3500 families have received individualised support from early help family services, which work alongside universal services to support parents and build parenting capacity. The 2023–24 budget provides \$11.2 million in 2023–24 to continue to embed, evaluate and refine the early help family services trial to guide future investment in early help.

Aboriginal people know the unique needs of their communities best, and Aboriginal community controlled organisations are best placed to lead care and support for Aboriginal children and families. There are now 15 Aboriginal community controlled organisations supporting Aboriginal children in care across Victoria, and we will talk more about the next stage of this work. More broadly, the importance of family preservation and reunification is reflected in our dedicated services. Since September 2020 more than 4000 families have been assisted by innovative family preservation and reunification services.

We know that once a person turns 18 it does not mean that their support needs vanish. Our Home Stretch program offers young people transitioning from care the option to remain with their carer or to live independently as they transition to adulthood.

The following slide: the 2023–24 budget provides \$140 million over four years to improve outcomes for First Nations children, the largest ever single investment in the Aboriginal-led service system. This investment is designed to support Aboriginal-led organisations to provide vital culturally informed child protection services.

The following slide: the 2023–24 state budget makes a substantial investment of \$548.4 million to deliver improved outcomes for children in residential care, the biggest single investment in care services in a decade.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. The first 7 minutes of questions are going to the Deputy Chair.

Nicholas McGOWAN: Thank you, Minister. Do you know how many child protection practitioner and staff vacancies are currently needing to be filled across Victoria?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: If I look at the last briefing which I received in relation to vacancies, there are currently 517.

Nicholas McGOWAN: And is that 517 FTE? Is there a breakdown in front of you – or that is hard to tell, I guess.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: That is FTE, yes.

Peta McCAMMON: We might just clarify that. It would not be very different in terms of people FTE, but we can clarify that. I would add, though, it is a very dynamic figure, so that is a point in time, and obviously it is something that we are working very hard to minimise – that number over the trajectory.

Nicholas McGOWAN: Great. Thank you. As of March, or even as recently as we can have, do we know how many children are awaiting allocation of a caseworker?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: First of all, though – I take your question, Mr McGowan, and I do have the answer here for you – it is important to be clear that there is active oversight of all children involved with the child protection system and that all cases are actively monitored for risk and allocated based on priority. All children involved with child protection are assigned to a team and overseen by a team manager, who has responsibility for actively reviewing, monitoring and managing cases as well as making allocation decisions, which are made on a case-by-case basis. Taken into account is obviously the level of risk to the child. That is

the primary consideration, of course, for a team manager when determining allocation priorities, and those children at significant risk of harm are prioritised for allocation to a practitioner.

In relation to the latest data, in quarter 3, 2022–23, there was an average of 86.5 per cent of cases allocated, with 13.5 per cent of cases awaiting individual practitioner allocation and assigned to a team. At the end of quarter 3 there were 2837 cases awaiting allocation, and at the end of quarter 3 there were 15,430 child protection cases allocated to a caseworker. In drawing a contrast there, when we came to government in December 2014 the allocation rate was 81.5, which is obviously 5 percentage points lower than the current rate. It is also important to note that the median caseload has also reduced from 16 to 13 since we came to government. So it is quite clear that despite there being more children in need of protection, there are more child protection staff, there are lower caseloads and there are higher allocation rates than previously was the case.

Nicholas McGOWAN: How many child protection staff do we have in total?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: We have funding for 1180 child protection practitioners.

Nicholas McGOWAN: And is that FTE again? I am sorry to be finicky.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Yes.

Nicholas McGOWAN: That is? Okay. Is that number actually higher than that, because obviously some of them might be part-time et cetera?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: I might refer to the Deputy Secretary of operations to provide further detail on the breakdown.

Danny O'KELLY: Sorry, Mr McGowan, I did not hear the first part of your question.

Nicholas McGOWAN: Sure: how many child protection officers do you have in total? I think the number was 1180. I am just trying to understand is that FTE, that number, or is it actually a number that is larger?

Danny O'KELLY: The number is larger. Our number of staff at the moment is just over 2200. Our funded base is significantly more than that. Not all of our FTE are protective interveners, though. We have a significant number of CPP2s at the moment, which is one of our pipelines where we sort of grow and develop new child protection workers to come into the system, and some of the vacancies that the minister referenced a little earlier sit at our 4 and 5 levels, which is where our more experienced practitioners are. So a significant part of our recruitment effort is really trying to bring in more people at those 4 and 5 levels. But our staffing numbers if we roll in our CPP2s, who are part of our workforce – an important part of our workforce – are at about 2200. It is a very dynamic figure, and we are bringing in –

Nicholas McGOWAN: Are you able to provide that breakdown for us?

Danny O'KELLY: A breakdown of –

Nicholas McGOWAN: Yes, the different categories, and how –

Danny O'KELLY: Of FTE by levels?

Danny O'BRIEN: And role.

Danny O'KELLY: Yes.

Nicholas McGOWAN: Thank you.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: And, sorry, I referred to the increased number before the 1180.

Nicholas McGOWAN: I appreciate that. Thank you.

Danny O'KELLY: We are pretty close to doubling the workforce in eight or nine years, so the vacancy rate sits against 600 new child protection practitioners we are still trying to recruit.

Nicholas McGOWAN: Totally. Just so I am clear, Minister: on the cases, it is my naivety here, but could one case actually represent a number of children or is that actually children per se?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: That is individual children.

Nicholas McGOWAN: That is individual children?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Yes.

Nicholas McGOWAN: Okay. Thank you. Obviously the 517 is a significant number, as I am sure you are aware more than anyone. What sort of strategies do we have in place to try and recruit those? Obviously, it is a difficult thing right now.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Yes, sure. I referred in my presentation to some of those strategies. In 2022–23 the Victorian government invested \$5.4 million over four years to continue the child protection vacation employment program, which provides social work students with paid on-the-job experience and creates a recruitment pipeline for child protection. We also have invested a further \$760,000 over three years committed to an international recruitment strategy to support qualified and experienced practitioners to relocate to Victoria, and the first of these has commenced in rural Victoria and more candidates are being assessed, with an expected commencement early in the next financial year. We also have the Go Where You're Needed and Jobs That Matter campaigns.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. We will go to Mr Galea for the next 7 minutes.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Chair. Good morning, Minister. Good morning, officials. Minister, I would like to ask about Closing the Gap, specifically budget paper 3, page 3, table 1.3. There is a line item 'Stronger Families – Closing the Gap by transforming the children and families service system', which I see totals around \$140 million in investment over the forward estimates. Minister, could you please outline what this investment includes?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Thank you. Because I talk fast I was worried that I would not fill the 5-minute presentation, but I actually did not get to some of this detail, so thank you for the question. This is obviously the largest single investment in Aboriginal care in the Aboriginal-led system. Victoria's Aboriginal children are around 20 times more likely to be placed in care than non-Aboriginal children, and that is a diabolical statistic that I certainly apologised for at Yoorrook on behalf of the Victorian government, but which the Premier and I have been quite concerned about and certainly has occupied a lot of my time since coming into this portfolio. Past policies have impacted adversely on the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal people and have failed to adequately support their cultural needs. To address this the Victorian government, in partnership with Aboriginal agencies, has developed policies and programs that enable Aboriginal self-determination and Aboriginal decision-making to reduce the over-representation of Aboriginal children in care. The 2023–24 state budget provides the largest ever single investment, \$140 million over four years, to continue to expand the Aboriginal-led service system. This \$140 million invested in the Labor government's partnership with First Nations Victorians is in addition to the overall investment of more than \$548 million in care services, which again is the biggest single investment in care services. This investment will provide more children with the support they need, with a safe and secure place to call home and specialised care for their social and emotional wellbeing. This investment importantly builds on the work to date.

Over the past four years this government has committed, through the *Roadmap for Reform* as well as through the more recent *Wungurilwil Gagapduir: Aboriginal Children and Families Agreement*, a tripartite agreement with the sector, to prioritise efforts to reduce the over-representation of Aboriginal children involved in child protection and out-of-home care. *Wungurilwil Gagapduir's* aims are that all Aboriginal children and young people are safe and resilient and can thrive in their culturally rich and strong Aboriginal families and their community, and this new investment builds on the \$191 million previously invested to implement *Wungurilwil Gagapduir* and its nation-leading initiatives, including ongoing funding for care and case management of Aboriginal children in care by an ACCO. Initiatives have included \$11.6 million over four years to establish two Aboriginal-led teams to respond to protection reports that require investigation, \$56.7 million over six years to transition Aboriginal children to ACCOs, \$24.8 million since 2016–17 to enhance Aboriginal-led culturally attuned advice and cultural connection for children provided to child protection and \$59.3 million over six years to expand the Aboriginal Children in Aboriginal Care program.

The significant investment of \$140 million includes expanding the Aboriginal children in Aboriginal care program to an additional 774 children authorised to an Aboriginal community controlled organisation by June 2027; 144 additional Koori-supported playgroups each year by 2025–26 in all 17 areas across the state; 330 additional Aboriginal families receiving Aboriginal-led family services aimed at diverting families from the child protection system each year by 2025–26 across the state; 85 additional Aboriginal families receiving the Aboriginal Family Preservation and Reunification response each year by 2026–27; expanding the Community Protecting Boorais program, an additional 174 children that can be investigated by an authorised Aboriginal agency; and continued support for the Aboriginal Workforce Fund, business planning resources for Aboriginal community controlled organisations, targeted training packages for approximately 100 sector workers and support for the Aboriginal Community Infrastructure Fund.

Importantly it should be noted that the government has worked in partnership with the Aboriginal community controlled organisations, with the ACCOs, in the planning and implementation work that this investment builds on. The Premier and I have met with key ACCOs that have been funded to deliver children and family services across the state on a number of occasions since December last year, and on hearing of this investment it was Professor Muriel Bamblett from VACCA who said, ‘The trajectories of so many Aboriginal children and families will be changed forever after today’s budget and for the better.’

Investing in families just makes sense. With Aboriginal decision-making in Aboriginal hands, struggling families can now get help – and early – knowing they will receive the culturally informed supports their families need to stay together safely. It is fair to say that, while the ACCO community is many and varied, with great ideas about how to implement this money in their own locations, it has been warmly welcomed as an indication of partnership.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Minister. You mentioned that the funding to enable 774 Aboriginal children to be moved into the Aboriginal children in Aboriginal care program by June 2027. Could you outline how this will be achieved?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Sure. ACAC is a cornerstone policy of the government. I spoke earlier of the government’s investment in implementing *Wungurilwil Gagapduir* and its nation-leading initiatives, and ACAC is key to that. ACAC enables ACCOs to be authorised to perform functions and powers usually undertaken by the Secretary of the department and assume responsibility for Aboriginal children on child protection on Children’s Court protection orders. To date, a recent evaluation of the initiatives within *Wungurilwil Gagapduir* tells us that Aboriginal children who are involved with child protection and managed by an Aboriginal agency are provided culturally appropriate, trauma-informed and timely case management. These children also state themselves that they are better connected to their culture, to their country and to their family. Aboriginal agencies are increasing the number of Aboriginal children reunified with family or in a stable, culturally safe alternative model of care. This investment to expand will ensure that 774 children, as you referenced, are authorised to an ACCO by June 2027. This is a 90 per cent increase from the current 396 fully authorised children and young people. This substantial increased investment will enable 1156 children to be managed by ACCOs.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. The next 7 minutes go to Mrs McArthur.

Bev McARTHUR: Thank you, Chair, Minister. Just going back to Mr McGowan’s questions, we are interested in how many children are awaiting allocation of a caseworker. What percentage is that across the child protection program?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: I am fairly certain I went to that in my original answer, but let me just go back to it. I think it was 86, from memory – 86.5, which is an improvement on the 81.5 per cent, allocated.

Bev McARTHUR: Thank you.

Peta McCAMMON: I guess just to clarify for the minister, that percentage is allocated, not unallocated.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Not unallocated. Sorry, I took it the other way around.

Bev McARTHUR: Not unallocated, okay. Could you provide, by chance, the number of children awaiting allocation of a caseworker by each LGA in Victoria?

Peta McCAMMON: We do provide quarterly data across our four regions. I would have to check with the team whether we could have anything more granular, but we do provide the four: north, south, east and west.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: On the website.

Peta McCAMMON: On the website.

Bev McARTHUR: Perhaps if we get that for a start.

Peta McCAMMON: Sure.

Bev McARTHUR: And if there is more, that would be fabulous. Thank you.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: The quarterly data is on the website, though, just to be clear.

Bev McARTHUR: Right. Thank you, Minister. According to a media piece in April, in a leaked department document entitled *Change Proposal*, detailing the chronic staff vacancy rates in child protection offices and the high rates of at-risk children who have no caseworker, it was reported that some offices have a staff vacancy rate of over 50 per cent. How long would a child wait to be allocated a caseworker when the child protection office is understaffed by 50 per cent?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: I will make some initial comments and then I will pass to the Deputy Secretary of operations. As I said in my earlier remarks in relation to Mr McGowan's question, there is active oversight of all children within the system at all times, and the active oversight is constantly prioritising the workers and the children based on the best interests of the child and where the demands for the highest needs are. That a child is not necessarily allocated an individual worker does not mean, or does not equal, that there is not active oversight of the circumstances of that child. But I might –

Bev McARTHUR: Is that active oversight adequate?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: The active oversight is constantly in a very dynamic system, measuring the needs of all children within that system at any point in time, but I can also pass to the Deputy Secretary of operations.

Danny O'KELLY: It is not a straightforward answer. It depends on the risk. If the risk is significant, based on assessment, the young person will not wait – they will be allocated. Our team managers and DAOMs are constant – it is a very dynamic process of assessing the risk that is happening in amongst the group of clients that they are supporting and allocating and de-allocating depending on what the risks are.

It is also important to point out that with that sort of allocation and active oversight process the KPI for child protection is actually 90 per cent, so we acknowledge that in the way the system works there are points in time for kids and families where there is actually a triaging process – there is a process that we need to go through to assess risk and urgency. You will never have 100 per cent allocations, because like other parts of health and community assistance there is triaging that happens. But based on risk, if there is urgent risk, cases are allocated. That is the assessment that our teams are working through all the time.

The other thing that happens is if we have particular areas where there is significant pressure, we will look at strategies to deploy capacity and effort from other places, including our statewide team, where we can activate additional supports into an area if they are significantly impacted by vacancies.

Bev McARTHUR: Thank you. Minister, the 2021–22 Commission for Children and Young People's annual report stated they initiated an investigation following an anonymous tip-off about a blitz of case closures in one of the child protection divisions as a 'strategy to manage high demand'. Was the government aware of this strategy?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Sorry, which report are you referring to, Mrs McArthur?

Bev McARTHUR: The Commission for Children and Young People's annual report.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: And, sorry, the question again?

Bev McARTHUR: Was the government aware of the strategy? Because it was reported that there was ‘a “blitz” of case closures’ in one of the child protection divisions as a ‘strategy to manage high demand’. Were you aware of that strategy?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Thank you, Mrs McArthur, for the clarification. Cases are always closed based on an assessment of the child and their needs at any point in time. Cases are not closed as a way of getting cases removed from the list, if you like. It is a dynamic system where cases are constantly assessed and reassessed in order to ensure that the protection of the child is happening. Deputy Secretary, was there anything else you wanted to add?

Danny O’KELLY: It is unfortunate language that gets used, because in that process of allocating and managing risk one of the things that we do not want to happen is case drift. If we think everything is in place, then it is appropriate that we close, as long as we do good assessment and good referral and we are satisfied that any supports that might need to be in and around a family and a young person are there so there is a level of comfort that we can close safely and that the young person will be supported appropriately.

Bev McARTHUR: Okay.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Sorry to interrupt you, Mrs McArthur. I was just going to say: that triaging analogy of when children come into the system but also that constant reassessment is, as the Deputy Secretary indicated, very similar to other kinds of community health systems where we are constantly assessing the risks and the best interests of the child or the patient or whoever it might be.

Bev McARTHUR: Thank you, Minister. Time will expire.

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

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you, Chair, Minister, officials. I would like to refer to page 40 of budget paper 3. There is an initiative called ‘Delivering improved outcomes for children in residential care’, towards the top of the table. Can you outline to the committee what is included in that initiative?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Sure. Thank you. This was another one that I glossed over in trying to get through the whole of the presentation. I am extremely proud of this achievement in the budget. Young people who are placed in residential care are some of the most vulnerable children and young people in our community, and they are placed in residential care if they cannot live safely with their family and are unable to be placed with a kinship or a foster carer. Residential care represents only a small proportion of Victoria’s care system – around 5 per cent on average; however, the children in residential care are amongst the most vulnerable and often have amongst the most complex needs of children who are within the system, due to their experiences of neglect and trauma.

Providing safe and quality residential care placements that meet young people’s cultural and developmental needs and help them recover from the impacts of trauma is a big priority. It is why our government has invested through successive budgets in improving the quality and safety of residential care and increasing access to therapeutic supports. The 2023–24 budget continues this reform and investment journey as we move towards a residential care system where every child has access to essential therapeutic supports. And this investment represents the biggest ever investment in care services in a single budget – \$548 million. The *Roadmap for Reform: Strong Families, Safe Children* committed to shifting the system from crisis response to one that intervenes earlier to prevent children and young people coming into care or to reunify them with their families and included the redesign of residential care.

Since 2015 all residential care homes have been progressively uplifted to a minimum complex level of funding. The uplifts supported the implementation of improved safety and supervision requirements across all homes by increasing the overnight staffing available to support young people and the introduction of safety plans for all homes. The uplift in funding and quality was supported by an investment of \$35.9 million through the 2016–17 budget and a further \$82.5 million over four years through the 2018–19 budget. To further enhance safety, since 1 January 2018 all residential care workers are required to hold minimum qualifications. This includes a certificate in child, youth and family intervention or a recognised equivalent, which provides mandatory training in residential care, trauma-informed care and managing behaviour to ensure a baseline of core capabilities for all workers. This biggest ever investment includes funding for the continued operation of

19 two- and three-bedroom residential care facilities; funding to operationalise the remaining six two- and three-bed residential care facilities which are being completed in the 2023–24 financial year; the continuation of targeted care packages to support children and young people to live in suitable care arrangements and prevent entry into residential care; the continuation of two-bedroom emergency residential care homes; funding to ensure that all children in residential care will be supported to access therapeutic supports; and funding to continue to address child sexual exploitation of children in residential care.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you, Minister. You spoke just then about increased therapeutic supports, and I can see that in the descriptor of the initiative on page 41. That increase in therapeutic supports in residential care homes, what is that referring to?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Thank you. This is a question I was most interested in in terms of how it was viewed when I first assumed this portfolio. Earlier this year I visited a number of residential care facilities across my electorate of Western Metropolitan. It was clear to me during that visit what the benefit of therapeutic supports are for those in residential care but also clear to me that we do not necessarily always explain them as well as we could. In addition, I have had a number of conversations with the ministerial youth advisory group, which has discussed the importance of therapeutic residential care supports, and I knew we needed to do more in this space. I actually brought with me a minute of that MYAG meeting, a pictorial minute, which I might ask someone to pass over to you, because I think in many respects hearing it in the words of the young people themselves is what is most powerful in terms of understanding what the therapeutic supports are.

Currently approximately 43 per cent of all residential care placements are funded directly to deliver therapeutic supports for young people. The 2023–24 budget investment will ensure that all standard four-bed residential care homes are funded to access a therapeutic specialist who can provide high-quality, trauma-informed advice, guidance and support to enable these children and young people to recover from their experiences and thrive and embed a trauma recovery and therapeutic approach in the day-to-day running of their homes.

As you can see before you, the ministerial youth advisory group explained their experiences, and the line that really stuck with me is ‘SHOULDN’T it be in ALL CARE?’ I attach this graphic because I think these young people explain the difference between a therapeutic support and not and how it can improve their lives far better than I can. It is why through the 2023–24 budget we are investing to ensure that all young people in residential care have access to therapeutic supports by 2025–26. Initially we were looking to increase therapeutic supports to 75 per cent of placements in 2024 before reaching all young people in residential care by 2025–26. This investment will provide all young people in residential care, whether they are in the four-bed homes or the two-bed homes, with access to therapeutic specialists who will work with young people and their care teams to help them recover and heal from trauma. This specialist support will deliver a range of benefits for children and young people, including more stable placements, avoiding the impacts associated with placement breakdown; improved emotional behaviour and mental health, including through improved relationships with family members and carers; improved education, participation and outcomes; and improved self-esteem.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you, Minister – very important. You spoke about two- and three-bed residential care investment. Can you go into a little bit more about what that is funding or what that is supporting?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Sure. This budget builds on historic funding. In 2020–21 the budget invested –

The CHAIR: Apologies, Minister.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: That is okay.

The CHAIR: For the next 7 minutes we are going to go to Mr O’Brien.

Danny O’BRIEN: Thank you, Chair. Morning, Minister. The institute of health and welfare *Child Protection Australia* report for 2021–22, which was only released a couple of weeks ago, indicated a net loss of 304 foster carers in Victoria. Was any modelling undertaken on raising the foster care allowance for this budget?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Thank you, Mr O'Brien, for your continued interest in this area. If I recall, I think this is an area you have asked questions on previously, and it is certainly an area that we continue to look at and do a lot of work on. We do provide a number of supports for carers. I have had this conversation a number of times in the chamber with Dr Bach in relation to the supports that we do provide for carers. We have the care support help desk. We have the care hub trial. We have the Carer Kafe, and there are the foster carer recruitment and retention strategies that we have – a number of things that go to supporting carers in the roles that they do. These matters are constantly under review, but it is important to say that we do value carers and we do provide allowances for carers that are indexed and which are supplemented by additional allowances on a needs basis.

Danny O'BRIEN: Okay. You mentioned how valuable foster carers are. I understand you have got a report by the Cube Group, which details the economic benefits of foster care to Victoria. Is that finalised, and can you provide us with a copy?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: The Cube report – that is not out.

Peta McCAMMON: My understanding is the Cube report was commissioned by the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, not the department, and I understand they are considering their approach to publishing that report.

Danny O'BRIEN: Okay. Thank you. Minister – or it might be to Mr O'Kelly perhaps – are you able to tell me, given the declining numbers in foster carers, on a net basis how many children (a) were placed in residential care (b) spent nights in hotel rooms for accommodation or (c) were moved into some other form of emergency accommodation last year?

Danny O'KELLY: In terms of how many are placed, one of the things that sits against a reducing number of foster carers is an increasing number of kids who are placed in kinship care. So it is really important that we sit what is happening in foster care against the work that is happening to ensure that kids, as much as possible, stay with families. That is one of the areas where we see a significant difference from us to other jurisdictions – around our increasing and growing ability to support people to find family and stay in family. If it is not parents, it is family. We have done a lot of work around support for kinship –

Danny O'BRIEN: I do understand that, Mr O'Kelly. I am just wondering: do you have the data on kids who could not go into foster care – where they went – or kinship care for that matter?

Danny O'KELLY: Usually if we are in a situation where the safety risk is so significant that we need a placement and we are unable to place that young person with a foster carer or with family, our next option is residential care, and an option after that would be a contingency placement, which is usually like a house with staff wrapped around it.

Danny O'BRIEN: Yes. I am after data on that if you have got it.

Danny O'KELLY: There is a very small number of circumstances where children have ended up where there might have been a small period of time that they spent in hotel with staff –

Danny O'BRIEN: You say 'very small'. Have you got data – the actual number?

Danny O'KELLY: I have not got the kids who are in hotels separated from kids who are in contingency placements.

Danny O'BRIEN: Okay. Could you give me whatever numbers you have got?

Danny O'KELLY: As at today, we have only got 53, which is a significantly reducing number. We have got 53 kids who are in what we define as contingency placements.

Danny O'BRIEN: Right. That is basically in a home with someone looking after them or in a hotel room?

Danny O'KELLY: Most of them are in a home with an agency looking after them, and a significant number of those are in almost a bespoke arrangement where, because of need and circumstance, we have had to

engage a specialist provider to come in provide support. It might be around disability need or it might be around significant supports that they have –

Danny O'BRIEN: Could I get that figure for 2021–22 if there is an end of year figure – as in how many over the year were in that sort of accommodation?

Danny O'KELLY: Across a full year?

Danny O'BRIEN: Yes. I am happy to take it on notice. Can I ask –

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Sorry to interrupt you, Mr O'Brien, but the other aspect of that would also just be that it could be transitory too. So there might be some kids who might spend a night or whatnot as their placement is secured.

Danny O'BRIEN: Yes. Can I ask, Mr O'Kelly, how many children under the age of 12 are currently in residential care?

Danny O'KELLY: I could come back to you on that exact data, because it may well be different today from a week ago.

Danny O'BRIEN: Do have quarterly data or anything there at the moment?

Danny O'KELLY: Not specifically for under 12s at hand.

Danny O'BRIEN: Righto. Can you tell me the age of the youngest child in resi care?

Danny O'KELLY: Not at hand; I have not got that at hand, but we can provide that.

Danny O'BRIEN: You are happy to take it on notice?

Danny O'KELLY: Yes.

Danny O'BRIEN: Okay. In the brief time I have got left, Minister, in the latest child protection quarterly incident report there were 322 incidents recorded of abuse. Are you able to tell me how many of those allegations of abuse related to sexual abuse in residential care?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: I will pass that to the Deputy Secretary.

Danny O'KELLY: Yes, and I will just have to try and find that specific data.

Danny O'BRIEN: If you have got data there in front of you, Mr O'Kelly, while you are looking for it, I am also looking for incidents of absenteeism – kids that have run away, effectively – and school attendance rates for kids in residential care, if you have it.

Danny O'KELLY: We have got all of that data. They are in separate places, and I do not want to give –

Danny O'BRIEN: Okay. I will start with the sexual abuse, if you have got it.

Danny O'KELLY: The number of incident reports that –

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: I can perhaps talk to the education issue while the Deputy Secretary is seeking the other information that you have asked for. I notice that this was a line of questioning in relation to early education yesterday with Minister Stitt as well.

Danny O'BRIEN: I am going to run out of time, Minister. If you are happy to provide the information as we go, that would be good.

The CHAIR: Apologies, Mr O'Brien, we are out of time. We are going to go to Mr Hilakari.

Mathew HILAKARI: Thank you, Minister, and thank you, officials, for your attendance this morning. I would like to take us to budget paper 3, pages 3 through 5 and specifically to 'Stronger Families – Closing the Gap by transforming the children and families service system'. I note that there is \$140 million presented over

the budget estimates. What I would really like to narrow it down to is around the early intervention programs that will help and assist in young people not actually entering the child protection system – that element of it, if that is okay, Minister.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Yes, sure. Thank you. What we have heard – and the evidence tells us loud and clear – is that the earlier we can help families the better, and the more supports we can wrap around families sooner, the more we can have an influence on reducing or limiting their trajectory through the system more broadly. The investment will provide more children and families with the support that they need earlier, and it will ensure that children and families have a safe and secure place to call home. At the meetings that the Premier and I have had with ACCOs we heard consistently of the need for Aboriginal-led programs that provide for that early intervention in a culturally safe environment and for cultural safety support. One that particularly struck me was the Garinga Bupup trial in Bendigo, which the DAC has undertaken. This trial provides wraparound early intervention support for unborn children and their mothers, supporting them and their child to prevent further child protection involvement.

We know that Aboriginal-led agencies are best placed to engage Aboriginal families and connect them to the services that they need to support them and to keep their children safe. Through this investment the government is partnering with ACCOs to deliver more early intervention and family services to more Aboriginal families, and our government is continuing to take an evidence-informed, whole-of-system approach to supporting families to optimise child safety and wellbeing as well as to build capability, resilience and connection to their communities.

The Victorian government has invested in trials of new early intervention service models, including family preservation and reunification responses. These trials are showing early evidence that families accessing these supports are less likely to require more intensive, costly interventions further down the truck and that shifting to more evidence-based and culturally informed models of service delivery is really making a difference. Around 15 per cent more children than expected were diverted from care after engaging with family preservation and reunification services compared to previous placement prevention programs, so the evidence is telling us that it is working. The investment in the 2023–24 budget includes 85 additional Aboriginal families receiving the preservation and reunification response each year by 2026–27, 330 additional Aboriginal families receiving Aboriginal-led family services aimed at diverting families from the child protection system each year by 2025–26 in all 17 areas across the state and 144 additional Koori-supported playgroups each year by 2025–26, which will be rolled out across all 17 areas as well.

We are partnering, as I have said a number of times this morning, with the ACCOs. This really is the key. By investing in Aboriginal-led early intervention and family services, the government is seeking to reduce the over-representation of Aboriginal children in the child protection system. Already 12 ACCOs are delivering the family preservation and reunification response across Victoria, and more broadly ACCOs deliver 15 per cent of all funded family services. This government is continuing to invest in more evidence-based and culturally informed models of service delivery.

[NAMES AWAITING VERIFICATION]

One case study I have cited in a ministers statement in the Legislative Council before, so I apologise to Legislative Council members amongst us, but it is important to show the benefits of Aboriginal family preservation. Jodie is a 17-year-old woman who is the sole carer for her infant daughter Lisa. Lisa is Aboriginal. At the time of her birth there were significant concerns for the safety of Lisa in her mother's care. Jodie had a long history of child protection involvement and a history of substance abuse. There were concerns around Jodie's ability to provide Lisa with adequate safety and stability, with Jodie regularly leaving Lisa in the care of her mother and sister. The Aboriginal family preservation and reunification response practitioner connected with Jodie and built a really trusting partnership. Recognising the importance of client-led engagement, Jodie had the space and the support to identify what were her own personal goals. They have worked together to identify strengths in Jodie's parenting and care for Lisa and are using these to build upon and identify areas for growth or that are requiring other further supports. They have also worked together to support Jodie's cultural and community connections in her local Aboriginal community, including through a playgroup which is run by a local Aboriginal organisation.

Jodie and Lisa have secured stable accommodation. There are no ongoing concerns that have been raised about the home or the attendance of others at the home. Jodie is maintaining contact with her family on her own terms and creating safety for herself and Lisa. She has returned to TAFE, studying three days a week. The enhanced maternal and child health nurse who has been working with Jodie and Lisa closed their service, advising Jodie is doing so well with the care of Lisa that she no longer requires the intensity of that service. Jodie and Lisa share a strong and positive bond, and Lisa's attachment relationship with her mother is evidently secure. It is just an example of the difference that this investment really can make on the ground.

Mathew HILAKARI: The investment is often made by critical workers undertaking this work, and I am so appreciative and thankful for the work that is undertaken by the workforce. But this specific set of dollars and this program – how will that add to the workforce and make sure that we are reducing any gaps in that workforce?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Yes. Thank you. As we have already discussed this morning in relation to some of Mr McGowan's questions, workforce really is key, and it is a key issue as well for the services that the ACCOs provide. Workforce is really something that needs to be invested in in terms of recruitment, retention and training and so forth across the whole of the child protection system, and we are seeking to do that. But specifically in relation to this \$140 million, there is \$9 million over four years to support Aboriginal workforce development and organisational capacity building through the sector-led Aboriginal Workforce Fund. That is subject to sector-led determination, and that is an important aspect of this – it needs to be sector led. We expect that investments may support key roles and traineeships in Aboriginal organisations, organisational development planning and other needs and upskill existing and new ACAC workers as well.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. We will go to Ms Sandell for the next 7 minutes.

Ellen SANDELL: Thank you, Chair. I also want to talk about reducing the over-representation of Aboriginal children in out-of-home care. My understanding is we are probably expecting the Yoorrook Justice Commission to make recommendations for significant reform in the child protection system sometime soon. Where will funding for that come from? Is that just a future allocation, or is that something that you have already anticipated funding for?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: We have not necessarily anticipated it. I mean, to go back to the premise of your question, Aboriginal children, as we have acknowledged in a number of forums, including here today, are massively over-represented in the system. With this \$140 million through the strategies that we have outlined this morning, one of the key points that both I and the Premier heard loud and clear from the ACCOs themselves was that, as much as it can, the funding needs to go to what are place-based flexible services, with the capacity for the ACCOs to self-determine the best way to spend that money. That is what this \$140 million is. It does not seek to, with all due respect, anticipate the recommendations of the commission. It acknowledges that there is a blatantly obvious problem of over-representation of Aboriginal children in the system, and the evidence tells us that Aboriginal children that are cared for in culturally appropriate settings do better. It seeks to, one, invest in programs like ACAC that we know are working and that are Aboriginal led, but also to provide funding to ACCOs for ACCOs to self-determine what are the programs, like the example that I just gave to Mr Hilakari's question in relation to the DAC – programs that we know are working in ACCOs already – and for them to continue those and to share those learnings with other ACCOs as well about what they think are the best place-based flexible things that will assist the over-representation.

Ellen SANDELL: There are two things that we expect to come. One is the recommendations from Yoorrook. The other is the passage of the statement of recognition Bill, which will give expanded powers to the ACCOs, and they will need commensurate funding to help them with those expanded powers. So my question is: you will probably need more than that \$140 million that you are talking about. Is that just subject to future budget allocations? I assume that the government is already thinking about what funding will be needed for both of those things which we can anticipate will come.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: I will take your second point first. In relation to ACAC and the extension of the powers that come through the statement of recognition Bill and the opportunity for ACCOs who want to be involved in ACAC, and involved in ACAC earlier, they will have that opportunity, and this budget does include the funding for that. One of the reasons why we were particularly anxious to see the Bill pass is we have got the money and we needed the authorisation for ACCOs to out there on the ground and do the work

that they know works in their community to reduce the over-representation and to wrap ACCO supports around Aboriginal children in care, so that is envisaged. It would be inappropriate to anticipate Yoorrook and their recommendations. We expect they will make some; we do not know what they are at this point in time. We will have to look at those and assess them, and if they require funding, assess that as well.

Ellen SANDELL: Okay, thank you. And in terms of care leavers, is extending out-of-home care support up to 21 still on the government's agenda?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: We have Home Stretch and Better Futures, and this budget obviously made a commitment as well to Housing First. Is there an aspect of that that you were specifically –

Ellen SANDELL: You have got the Housing First commitment in here around young people leaving residential care. Are you also considering amending reforms to extend support for people say up to 25, which I know has been a call from the sector for a while?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: We have Better Futures, we have Home Stretch and this budget, importantly, invests in Housing First. I think it is important that we get the strategy right for those up to 21 first, that we continue the Better Futures and the Home Stretch and put in place Housing First. Young people themselves tell me each of those things is important to them, but we do not necessarily have – and Housing First is a good example. I spoke earlier about visiting residential care placements in my electorate of Western Metropolitan not so long ago. Certainly a key thing that the older young people in those houses were talking to me about was Better Futures and Home Stretch but also that option of issues like – which I know you would be well aware of with your advocacy and engagement on these issues – their capacity to get rental agreements and develop a rental history and all of those kinds of things going forward. These programs allow them either to choose to have the supports and the allowances to remain at home or have the opportunity to engage with programs that allow them to build those rental histories, that allow them to use other supports through Better Futures. In the same ways other young people in other families have their parents to help them do those things, where they do not, these programs are wrapping those services around the young people in that 18 to 21 leaving-school bracket, if you like – the sorts of services and supports that they need to set themselves up for the next stage in their journey.

Ellen SANDELL: I know it is not in the budget, so just tell me to get lost if you want –

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: I would never do that to you, Ellen.

Ellen SANDELL: Up to 25 – obviously there has been that call to extend programs post 21. I do not know if there is anything you can say about whether the government is looking at that.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: I think as evidenced by the suite of programs we have put forward in this budget, the programs are constantly under evaluation, and we are constantly looking at what is working. We have taken the next step that the sector and the young people themselves were asking us to take in terms of how we can support young people as they exit care on their pathway out of care, but they are constantly evaluated.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Ms Sandell. We are going to go to Mr Hamer – on the screen, in case you missed him.

Paul HAMER: Thank you, Minister. Thank you, officials. I would like to just ask a few questions specifically about family services, because I noticed in your presentation there has been a significant increase in investment, particularly over the last [Zoom dropout]

Danny O'BRIEN: I think he is going to have to cede his time to us.

Paul HAMER: to a number of initiatives related specifically to family services.

Mathew HILAKARI: He sent me the questions earlier. He is a technologically adept person.

The CHAIR: Mr Hamer, I am going to interject just for a moment. We are struggling to hear you, so I am going to pass to Mr Hilakari.

Mathew HILAKARI: Thank you. Apologies that you are not receiving this from Mr Hamer, but I do appreciate that he has provided these to me. I will take you to budget paper 3, pages 40 and 41, referring to table 1.11 and the investment in family services. Could you please provide a bit of detail, Minister, of the investment in this area?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Yes, sure. Thank you. The Victorian government has, as I said earlier in my presentation, more than tripled family services funding from \$120 million per annum in 2012–13 to more than \$398 million in 2023–24. The number of unique families supported each year in family services has grown by 40 per cent from 8983 in 2009–10 to 12,627 in 2021–22. In addition, parenting programs and supported playgroups support over 20,000 families each year. Our government is continuing to take an evidence-informed approach, as I have said in other areas of questioning this morning, a whole-of-system approach to supporting families. There are a number of new investments in the 2023–24 state budget for families. There is \$11.2 million to ensure that 3300 families receive help when they need it through the continuation of the Early Help Family Service trial, which, as we talked about earlier, Mr Hilakari, goes to that issue of helping people as soon as we can, getting the services wrapped around them early and hopefully preventing people's trajectory deeper into the system. And as I have noted, the state budget also provides \$140 million to improve outcomes for First Nations children with a number of initiatives there, which I have also spoken to already a couple of times this morning.

We do recognise the ongoing cost pressures that are impacting community service providers across Victoria and Australia, and the community sector has told us of the cost pressures they are experiencing and how these have been exacerbated by the impact of COVID-19 and the changes in the economy. That is why in the 2023–24 state budget the Victorian government is investing \$55 million over four years responding to the critical needs of the community sector as well. We are also providing funding for the sustainable delivery of a broad range of services by community service organisations, and the 2023–24 state budget funding builds on the 2022–23 state budget, which provided \$63.8 million to community sector jobs. This funding also responded to critical cost pressures identified by the sector, particularly minimum wage costs and CPI increases, assisting to ease some of the financial cost pressures impacting community service organisations. It is important to note that this 2023–24 investment builds on the investment in the 2022–23 state budget of \$40.68 million over two years to meet growing demand for family services and support an additional 1000 families each year. This is in addition to the 2020–21 and 2021–22 state budgets, which provided \$335 million and \$88 million retrospectively to test, trial and expand earlier intervention service models. This early intervention and support is targeted to prevent families from entering the child protection system or to help them rebuild and reunify their families once child protection has been involved. More families now have access to earlier support, and support has become more intensive and enduring for those who need it.

Mathew HILAKARI: Thank you, Minister. There is a really substantial set of supports here. I just want to take you to one in particular, which is the \$11.2 million for responding to family services demand. Are you able to just take us through in a bit more detail what this early help provides?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Sure. The Victorian government is, as you say, investing \$11.2 million in 2023–24. What the early help family services trial does is work to embed family services in universal settings such as schools, early years services and community health hubs to provide more accessible services to vulnerable families, and this means that 3300 families will continue to receive early help family services for a further year. The evidence tells us that it is successful. The early help family services trial, alongside the other family services trials that we fund, is showing us again – we have said it a number of times this morning, but it is true across this portfolio – the evidence is that the earlier we can provide help to people, the better off they will be and the less likely they will be to require intensive and costly interventions further down the track. More than 60 per cent of families accessing early help family services show improvements in parenting self-efficacy, a measure that is strongly associated with better outcomes for children, and the early help family services trial means that more families have access to the earlier support.

One case study that I think demonstrates it well is Debbie and her two children Jed and Annie, who are also Aboriginal. Debbie self-engaged with the early help program at Jed's school to increase her parenting capacity and help manage Jed's behaviours. Early help assisted Debbie to access a paediatrician and linked her into a peer support group and the Tuning in to Kids program. They also supported Jed to join a local soccer club and connected the family with the local Aboriginal community. Jed's behaviour and attitude have improved and his

social interactions are now positive, and Debbie reports that she feels more confident in her parenting and is keen to continue to attend the support groups.

Mathew HILAKARI: That is fantastic. I am really pleased to hear of those percentage increases as well, so that is fantastic. I would just like to take us to allocation rates and practitioner case load, and it has been a feature of some other questions earlier. But particularly in relation to this program, how does that improve that?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Thank you. We have spoken about these issues a number of times this morning –

The CHAIR: Apologies to interrupt, Minister. The time has come for the end of questions.

Danny O'BRIEN: Chair, point of order?

The CHAIR: Mr O'Brien, on a point of order.

Danny O'BRIEN: Mr O'Kelly and the minister were going to provide me some data points.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: We can provide those to you on notice, Danny.

Danny O'BRIEN: You don't have them now?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: I had some more commentary I guess around the education, but we will take your questions and provide them to you.

Danny O'BRIEN: Thank you.

Danny O'KELLY: It is not broken down in the way that you have asked.

Danny O'BRIEN: If you can provide whatever you can, that would be great. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr O'Brien. Minister and department officials, thank you very much for appearing before the committee today. The committee is going to 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 lunchbreak before beginning its consideration of the disability, aging and carers portfolio at 1 o'clock. Thank you. I declare this hearing adjourned.

Witnesses withdrew.