

CORRECTED VERSION

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into budget estimates 2011–12

Melbourne — 19 May 2011

Members

Mr N. Angus

Mr P. Davis

Ms J. Hennessy

Mr D. Morris

Mr D. O'Brien

Mr M. Pakula

Mr R. Scott

Chair: Mr P. Davis

Deputy Chair: Mr M. Pakula

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Witnesses

Ms M. Wooldridge, Minister for Community Services,

Ms G. Callister, Secretary,

Mr J. Higgins, Acting Executive Director, Corporate Services Division,

Ms C. Asquini, Executive Director, Children, Youth and Families Division, and

Mr A. Rogers, Executive Director, Disability Services Division, Department of Human Services.

The CHAIR — I now welcome Ms Chris Asquini, executive director, children, youth and families division, Department of Human Services, and Mr Arthur Rogers, executive director, disability services division, Department of Human Services. I now call on the minister to give a brief presentation of no more than 10 minutes on the more complex financial and performance information relating to the budget estimates for the community services portfolio. The remainder of the time after the presentation will be devoted to questions on the community services portfolio.

Overheads shown.

Ms WOOLDRIDGE — I am very pleased as Minister for Community Services to present the budget outcomes today to this committee, because it is a very significant result for vulnerable people who are supported by the funding this community services portfolio delivers. As you can see, there are some significant investments right across the board. We have new investment in disability services, new investment in child protection and family services, a 10 per cent increase in youth services and youth justice, that significant 29.6 per cent increase in terms of the concessions budget — a very positive result and one that has been widely welcomed by the community — and new funding, as we see, in relation to each and every one of those areas delivering these services.

I will just run through some of the key aspects of what sits behind those very good numbers. In terms of delivering better outcomes for child protection there is no doubt this has been a significant focus of the coalition government. It is an area where there are some real challenges, and we know that significant differences need to be made to make sure that we reduce abuse and that we reduce the impact of abuse and neglect when it happens.

We have election commitments that we made in relation to antenatal and postnatal services, a new innovative child-care pilot for kids at risk and an independent children's commissioner reforming the way we work with families, all funded in this budget. There were also some areas that had lapsing programs which the previous government had not committed to taking forward in relation to capacity building of services of Aboriginal organisations and early childhood development workers, both of which we have funded in order to have some continuity.

There is also a very significant investment of 47 new child protection workers. The demand is increasing. The pressures are there, and this is a substantial investment in front-line workers. Our investment in child protection services comes at a time when we also have a broader inquiry under way. We could have sat on our laurels in relation to investments as part of our election commitments, which were widely welcomed, but we have gone further in relation to child protection services, and I am very pleased about that. We think they will start to make the difference that we need to make for child protection services.

Another area of real pressure has been out-of-home care. This was highlighted in an own-motion investigation from the Ombudsman in which there was some very damning evidence in relation to what was going on in out-of-home care and what needed to change. The numbers are going up. The pressure is on the system. Once again there are very positive investments here, both from election commitments and new investment in relation to things that you and I would anticipate were happening if it had not been brought to our attention that they were not.

Are kids coming into residential care getting assessments so they know what sort of health and educational support they need? By and large they are not. We are going to make sure that they do. How do we support young people — 16, 17 and 18-year-olds — transitioning out of residential care to independence? As we see some children staying with Mum and Dad at home, when they have one, into their 20s, sometimes their 30s, at 18, 17, sometimes even 16, young people who have been abused and neglected are actually transitioning to independence at a very young age without that transitional support.

We are also investing in out-of-home care placements. One of the key issues that the Ombudsman identified was a gap in terms of support for out-of-home care placements and the demand that was already there and is coming in the future, so we are investing in out-of-home care placements, both in foster care environments and other residential and other environments, to make sure that we have the out-of-home care environment that we need. This is an initial investment. There is longer term planning about how we go to the structural heart of the challenges in out-of-home care, but we are making significant investments in this budget to make sure that

while we do that longer term planning, while we hear from the Protecting Victoria's Vulnerable Children inquiry, that out-of-home care is delivering what it needs to.

In terms of youth justice services, this is once again an area that has been the subject of an Ombudsman's inquiry in relation to the Parkville precinct. Some very concerning issues were raised by the Ombudsman. This budget invests in a twofold way. We are looking at the Parkville precinct in and of itself — what needs to be done and how the staff are trained to have the capacity to do their job effectively — and putting in place longer term planning in relation to what those facilities should be for the future of youth justice generally. But what we are also investing in is diverting young people from the justice system and certainly from justice facilities by expanding group conferencing, expanding male support programs and working with youth justice workers and young people so that they can be remanded in the community rather than in, say, Parkville. With some early piloting of these initiatives we are already seeing that we get better outcomes. There is reduced recidivism and better outcomes for young people who may be contemplating or engaged in crime by diverting them away from that. This is very clearly a two-pronged strategy in relation to our investments — both our election commitments but also our new investments in relation to the youth justice area.

In terms of disability services, there is a significant investment, once again, in disability. This is an area of massive demand that is not being met and has not been met — year in, year out. This is an area that we are not going to fix overnight, but we are making some inroads in relation to that. We have invested in aids and equipment programs. We are investing in new and innovative forms of accommodation and new and innovative forms of respite, including school holiday respite — some of those simple things that parents are incredibly welcoming of because it will make a difference. While it is broader than DHS, I do want to note the government's significant investment in relation to students with a disability. This has been widely welcomed and is a significant investment that will change outcomes for many people with disabilities and their families.

In relation to the cost of living, as I mentioned at the beginning there is a very substantial increase in our investment, including making the six-month electricity concession an annual concession, a significant increase in the water and sewage concession cap and the bringing forward of the electricity concession. Through our concessions programs there is nearly \$450 million to take some of the pressure off those cost-of-living challenges that families are facing.

We are also investing in community programs. One of the good things in terms of the change of government and what sits where is that programs like the men's sheds, neighbourhood houses and community renewal have come across from DPCD to DHS. We are now very fortunate to be able to incorporate them into the suite of services we are offering. We have a number of commitments in relation to things like men's sheds, including new funding for programs that were lapsing and would have finished such as the men's sheds, neighbourhood participation and, as I have mentioned, women's economic participation.

I want to touch very briefly on a couple of areas that are also being invested in. We have our significant investment in relation to the pay equity case. There is \$200 million in this budget in relation to supporting the outcomes of that case. We are also funding an increase in the cost of insurance. DHS and the government fund the insurance for all community service organisations, which as we know has been exorbitant over the years. We fund that insurance so that they can be confident they have that cover. Through the vagaries of the year and when public holidays fall, there was also additional funding needed for public holidays.

The last thing I want to touch on is flood recovery services. There is very significant investment in the Loddon and Grampians regions, including not only psychosocial support but also housing support and other mechanisms. There is \$11.6 million for regional recovery services associated with the floods, and, as previously announced, there is also ongoing funding in this budget for an expanded bushfire support program for those communities affected by the Black Saturday fires.

The CHAIR — In relation to the matter of population and demographic change, I ask: how have predictions concerning population growth shaped the budget for 2011–12 and the out years in relation to the community services portfolio?

Ms WOOLDRIDGE — For the third time today, but with a slightly different focus, I am pleased to talk in relation to the population growth challenges, because when you look at the population growth and break it down a little more, some of the significant growth is in the 0-to-19-year-old group. In fact over the next 25 years

there is projected to be a 20 per cent increase in that area. Young people are growing in particular, and there are also some growth areas such as Cardinia, Melton and Wyndham where there is a particular focus in terms of where that growth is happening. While we are used to focusing on population growth, the reality is that it leads to greater demand for services and it can result, if it is not planned for, in pockets of disadvantage. We have to make sure that services keep up with that growth so they can be delivered.

One of the things I want to mention in terms of this budget anticipating some of that growth and being able to deal with it is that the growth often affects universal services but that the flow-on effect to services such as those we deliver through DHS to the vulnerable in our community are particularly impacted on as well. Child protection demand is one of those areas. Young families face additional pressures, particularly those in more disadvantaged communities, which can lead to abuse, violence and neglect — these are some of the things that we see. Having additional workers to be able to meet the additional demand for child protection notifications, investigations and ongoing support is absolutely critical, and that delivers right to the heart of that. We will be making sure that workforce delivers to where that demand growth is.

There is also extra funding for home-care placement capacity, and, because it largely relates to foster carers and other flexible mechanisms, that will be delivered where that demand is needed. One of our biggest challenges is making sure we have enough services where young people live in relation to other out-of-home-care support, and we will be developing those services.

Demand for disability services also exceeds supply across all regions, and this budget will be funding additional supported accommodation and additional respite. There is funding in the budget from the previous government that has not yet been allocated or is starting to be allocated that will once again go to the heart of those areas where there is not accommodation, where there is not respite and where the growth has not been planned for and those services have not been delivered. We now have the flexibility to be able to meet some of that demand through the innovative and flexible funding that we have, so that will be able to be targeted towards it.

In addition, with ageing Victorians and disadvantaged groups the extension of the concessions will go to the heart of where people need them most. As long as they are eligible they will be able to access those concessions, and the same will apply with the water and sewerage concessions.

We undertake the analysis in relation to the growth. It does present challenges, but we continue to make sure that we have the information and the knowledge. Although it is hard, because these have long lead times, we will be planning for growth in the future and making sure that the services can meet the demand rather than playing a continual game of catch-up, which I think has been the experience in the past.

Mr PAKULA — Minister, my question relates to page 9 of your presentation. I am going to ask a very specific question, and I would be grateful for an equally specific answer. Minister, prior to the election you informed the stakeholders that the government would fund the outcome of the SACS pay equity case. The guarantee you gave was that the increases would be funded, whether or not they went above the \$200 million over four years which you have budgeted for. My question is: do you stand by the commitment to ensure that Victorian workers in the sector will receive all of the increases awarded under the pay equity case through increased government funding and that departmental funding agreements, programs and services will not be compromised, reduced or offset against the cost of ensuring that workers receive the increases that are awarded by FWA?

The CHAIR — There are a number of threads to that, but I am sure — —

Mr PAKULA — It is one question: will you fund the lot?

The CHAIR — The minister will respond, if you give her the opportunity. I invite the minister to respond.

Ms WOOLDRIDGE — I am very pleased that the Baillieu government has \$200 million on the table already in relation to the pay equity case. We are the only government of all the states and territory governments and the federal government that has actually put more than 1 cent on the table in relation to this. So that is \$200 million, Baillieu government; zero, federal government; zero, every other state and territory government. There is not a dollar committed. There is \$200 million in this budget to support the pay equity case.

The interim decision, recognising that there was a pay differential, came down on Monday in relation to it. We support that, we recognise that in our policies and we believe that there is a differential and that it needs to be addressed. The challenge and what Fair Work Australia has said, though, is that they have as yet, from the information provided, been unable to quantify what that differential actually is — and no-one has. Rather than handing down a final determination, they have asked for more information from the unions, from the governments and from all those people involved.

We do not yet have a decision in relation to this case. We do not know how much the decision is going to cost in relation to its impact. What we do know is that the Victorian government is the only government with any money on the table for it, and what we do have is \$200 million on the table to support this case. There is a long way to go. We will work collaboratively in relation to the next stage and make sure we provide information to Fair Work Australia so that that determination can be made about what the differential is, but we do not yet have a decision in relation to the case.

Mr PAKULA — Minister, I know we do not have a decision in regard to the case, and I know that we do not know what the total cost is. That was the point of my question. The point of my question is: if the outcome of the case is that the cost to government will be more than \$200 million, will you stick to your pre-election commitment that you will fund it entirely, without cutting services?

Mr O'BRIEN — On a point of order, it is a hypothetical question. Without knowing what the other governments — —

Mr PAKULA — It is not a hypothetical question, Mr O'Brien. You should learn something about this before you comment.

Mr ANGUS — It is a hypothetical question. Of course it is a hypothetical question.

Ms HENNESSY — Will she keep her promise?

Members interjecting.

Mr O'BRIEN — You can shout as much as you like, but it is a hypothetical question.

Mr PAKULA — No, it is not hypothetical, because the promise was made before the election that it will be funded in its entirety, regardless of the outcome.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Deputy Chair.

Ms HENNESSY — Then say, 'I keep my promise'.

The CHAIR — This is not a Trades Hall meeting. I ask members of this committee to be courteous to one another, and everybody can have their say. The Deputy Chair has asked a follow-up question, and there may be different views about whether it is an appropriate question, but I am going to allow the minister to answer.

Ms WOOLDRIDGE — I think I have been very clear: there is \$200 million on the table. We have to see what the final decision is to know what the extent of it is. The decision could be less, or it could be more. It could be anything — we do not know. We will be responding to that decision, and we will be working with the federal government. Interestingly, the federal government has not committed 1 cent yet in relation to their role — —

Mr PAKULA — We are talking about people you employ. We are talking about state employees.

Members interjecting.

Mr ANGUS — You're taking a fight to the wrong government.

Mr PAKULA — You are not asking the feds to pay for state employees.

Ms HENNESSY — These are the people who deliver your services. Stand up for them.

Mr PAKULA — The feds do not employ them; the Victorian government employs them.

The CHAIR — Order! You are not a union leader now.

Mr MORRIS — Minister, I turn to page 119 of budget paper 3, in particular the line ‘Child protection demand’. I think we are all aware that there has been some discussion about issues of capacity in the child protection system for a number of recent years. I ask you to indicate to the committee the extent of the initiatives identified in budget paper 3 and how the initiatives will help vulnerable Victorian children?

Ms WOOLDRIDGE — Thanks very much, Mr Morris, for that question, because it is a very important one for the future of children in this state. As I have said, we have an inquiry into protecting Victoria’s vulnerable children. That will give advice to government in relation to what we need to do, but that has not stopped us both committing to a substantial number of initiatives and making new commitments in relation to this budget.

What we have inherited is: significant staff shortages that have led to a significant number of unallocated cases — that is, where a child may have had their abuse and neglect proven but they have not been allocated a worker to work with them; front-line staff turnovers at the entry level of one in four every year — significant turnovers; and a very inexperienced workforce. The Ombudsman did a report into this particular area and was quite scathing in his commentary about it. What we are doing, in the first instance, is significantly increasing front-line staff to be able to do that, and we are providing \$19.5 million in this budget over the four years to deliver those 47 additional staff. It has been very widely welcomed that we are bringing additional staff on and making that commitment.

What we need to do, though, is not only bring on more staff but we need to actually reform what is happening in relation to staff so that they are excited about their roles — which they are — and so that some of the limitations are removed and that we retain them, because the retention of the staff has actually been like a holey bucket. The staff come in, and they are leaving so quickly as a result.

One of the first things I did as minister was to meet with a number of front-line child protection worker groups. I went out to different regions — Mr Davis, down to your area down in Gippsland first of all, and other regions as well — to hear from them so that we could work out what it was we needed to do, and we have been conducting some research and other things as well. They love their jobs, but they want more time working with families and children. They want more support with the really complex situations that they face and that they have to make decisions about. New workers, especially, want more assistance early on in their career — more supervision, more support and more training — so that they can do this difficult job. They also want improved career pathways. At the moment what we see is that if you are a child protection worker, the way to progress is to move into administration and management — leaving what they often love most about the job, which is working with families and children and making a significant difference.

In addition to the 47 new workers we are also engaging in a discussion about the restructure of the workforce more generally to achieve these outcomes, and we believe this will deliver the biggest ever increase in front-line child protection workforce staff, with about 160 more front-line staff as a result. This is about a 20 per cent increase in the workforce who are working with families and children. We are making really significant investments and reforms in relation to addressing child protection demand, and we are making sure that we have workers who are not only excited to join but excited to stay and do this really important work with families and children.

Mr SCOTT — Minister, I refer you to budget paper 3, page 222, and the output measure ‘Child protection reports’. I note that the footnote to this measure refers to ‘heightened awareness and sensitivity to child protection’. Could the minister advise the committee if the voluntary briefs on child protection cases prepared by the department are included in this measure, and is the footnote referring to the minister’s own increased awareness and sensitivity after it was revealed that she had asked her department not to send her briefs on these matters?

Ms WOOLDRIDGE — Can I get clarification of which output measure you are talking about?

Mr SCOTT — Child protection reports. It is at page 222, and it is the first point under ‘Statutory child protection services’.

Ms WOOLDRIDGE — I think there is perhaps some confusion from the member in relation to what ‘Child protection reports’ actually means. Sixty thousand reports are nurses, teachers and police ringing child

protection services and reporting cases of abuse. This is in no way connected or in any way related to the number of briefs or reports that come into my office. I think there is a disconnect in relation to that understanding.

These child protection reports are increasing because, unfortunately, of the repeated failures and because of the highlighting of the real gaps in services that the Ombudsman's report has made. The media coverage, the profile and the community awareness have actually had a positive result in that it does mean that more people know they need to report and think about reporting, which is the heightened community awareness that is referred to there. It is unfortunate that we have had such failures that have been highlighted, but the result of that has been that more children have been reported as a result. If we have more people in the system, hopefully we have a greater ability to make sure they are protected and safe as well. That is what this measure refers to, and that is why this measure has increased substantially over the year.

Mr SCOTT — Of course voluntary briefs are the result of the expenditure of funds appropriated in this budget to the department, so I would be interested to ask the follow-up: what directions have been given to the secretary of the department about voluntary briefs, and what processes have been put in place regarding voluntary briefs going to the minister's office, as it relates to these funds that are expended by the department that are appropriated in this budget?

Ms WOOLDRIDGE — This is an incredibly long bow, but firstly I clarify —

Mr SCOTT — It is public funds.

Ms WOOLDRIDGE — that voluntary briefs were never stopped from coming to my office. In fact every brief that I need I have received and it has been considered by myself and my office. What we did put in place is an opportunity to engage with the department — more so than had been previously done in the past — and we asked the department that they actually — —

Mr PAKULA — 'I don't want to know' is an opportunity to engage!

Ms WOOLDRIDGE — They actually — —

Mr O'BRIEN — No, you don't want to know the answer.

Mr PAKULA — 'I don't want to know' — —

Mr O'BRIEN — Just listen to the answer.

The CHAIR — Now, Deputy Chair, your colleague has asked a question and he has asked a follow-up question; you will pay the minister the courtesy of hearing the reply. The minister to continue without interruption.

Mr PAKULA — Appropriately ticked off, Chair.

Ms WOOLDRIDGE — So what we thought was a very good way to go is that someone picks up the phone. If they had a brief that they wanted to send up, they pick up the phone and have a conversation about that brief — why it is important and what is happening — rather than just another brief landing on the doorstep and the department hoping that someone in the office would read it, which was the case under the previous situation. We have put in place for a short period of time a system where for voluntary briefs the officers were asked to pick up the phone and talk to the office about them before they were sent up. I believe that has led to good relationships, good engagement and good communication. I can assure the committee that every brief that is needed about vulnerable children, people with disabilities, people in youth justice — all the issues that we deal with — is received and addressed by my office.

Mr ANGUS — Minister, I refer you to budget paper 3, page 121, and in particular the note there 'Improving youth justice custodial services and the Parkville youth justice precinct', and I note that you referred to that in passing as well as in your presentation and also in relation to the Ombudsman's report, which we know mentioned the conditions in the youth justice centre precinct having deteriorated significantly in recent times. Minister, can you please tell the committee how much funding this budget provides in this regard and what the government will do to fix the problems in our youth justice system?

Ms WOOLDRIDGE — Thank you very much, Mr Angus, for that question. Youth justice facilities in Victoria are in critical need of redevelopment, redesign and funding to actually make sure they are effective for the purpose that they are there for. The Ombudsman did do another own motion in relation to youth justice facilities at the Melbourne youth justice precinct, particularly Parkville, and found the conditions to be appalling. We also had Neil Comrie undertake a review, and the two reviews together identified a number of issues, including issues about security and compliance with procedures; services to young people, such as education programs, need to be increased; the physical condition of the centre needed improving; the workforce needed better supervision, recruitment, training and development; and there were real questions about the long-term future in relation to the Parkville facility.

We have invested in a number of ways that are going to make a difference in relation to the Parkville precinct. Firstly, we are investing over \$4 million to improve the recruitment and training of custodial staff. We think this is a really critical area. We want to make sure we are attracting appropriately skilled people and providing the staff with adequate training to meet the needs of young people at Parkville, who have challenging and complex needs and behaviours.

There are other things that are being undertaken, some of these were initiated under the previous government in response to the Ombudsman's report, such as constructing a single point of entry to improve community safety and to reduce the risk of contraband entering the site; making other security improvements such as installing CCTV; increasing supervision at night — there was an escape that happened in the evening and we are increasing that supervision to cover it; addressing unacceptable conditions at the site, including refurbishing some bedrooms, bathrooms, passageways and common areas; and also bolstering some of the education programs in relation to the young people who are in there.

In addition, we are also investing \$1 million in this budget to invest in planning for the future of the site. It is very clear there are some questions about the capacity of the site and its basic structural design to be effective in the role it needs to play, so we are investing in this budget to both address the immediate staff and training, we are investing to do the fabric issues that can be done with the facilities that we have got, but we are also investing about a plan for the future in terms of our youth justice facilities as a whole.

Ms HENNESSY — Minister, in reference to budget paper 3, page 119, and the output 'better outcomes for out-of-home care', I was wondering if the minister could please tell the committee and identify what new specific measures have been introduced to prevent future occurrences of events like that which occurred at Coburg Lake in February 2011.

Ms WOOLDRIDGE — As I have mentioned, we have a lot of investment across the board for out-of-home care, including a substantial investment in foster carers and other out-of-home care placements, which will mean that community sector organisations and carers have the funding and support to do the job they need to do. There are additional things that we have done to address some of the specific issues in relation to the particular incident that the member refers to. It has been a longstanding practice, 40 or 50 years, that the Victorian government has relied on community sector organisations to deliver out-of-home care services, and with that you have to push appropriate risk and support as well to make sure out-of-home care agencies, community sector agencies, can deliver that care.

What we have identified is a significant gap in relation to the employment of agency staff. So there are a couple of things that this budget will help to provide and that we will do in an ongoing way. One, work with employment agencies to make sure that the staff that are being provided to community sector organisations have the skills, expertise and knowledge of the law and responsibilities that they need to do the job for community sector organisations in out-of-home care. There will actually be an MOU in relation to employment agencies with the community sector organisations about making sure that those skills and capabilities are in the staff that fill those agency-type roles.

We are also working directly with the community sector organisations to strengthen both their accountability and service delivery in relation to all aspects of what they do in delivering these out-of-home care services. We believe that our investments at a broader level in addition to specific actions that we are taking in relation to some longstanding concerns that had not been previously addressed will strengthen the delivery of out-of-home care services in the state.

Ms HENNESSY — To clarify, Minister, have you changed any processes in your office so you are not left to learn about such incidents through the media?

The CHAIR — I beg your pardon, Ms Hennessy, I do not think that is appropriate.

Mr O'BRIEN — On a point of order, it is clearly inappropriate.

Ms HENNESSY — It fundamentally goes to how cat 1 processes are dealt with.

Mr ANGUS — No, it does not.

Members interjecting.

The CHAIR — I think we will move on.

Mr ANGUS — It is a stunt.

Mr O'BRIEN — It goes to you being — —

Members interjecting.

The CHAIR — I think we will move on.

Mr O'BRIEN — It is some more grandstanding.

Mr ANGUS — Grandstanding is a good description for it.

Mr O'BRIEN — Take it out to the media.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Mr O'Brien.

Ms HENNESSY — I would have thought the minister would like to address the point.

Mr ANGUS — She has already.

Mr O'BRIEN — I ask you to turn to an important part of the budget paper 3.

Mr PAKULA — What? Cat 1 is unimportant?

Mr O'BRIEN — Disability services. Excuse me!

Ms HENNESSY — What? Learning about a child at risk through the media has been lost — that is not important? That is not important, Mr O'Brien?

Mr PAKULA — You are not nearly as clever as you think you are, are you?

Mr O'BRIEN — Point of order.

The CHAIR — Mr O'Brien.

Mr O'BRIEN — I find that I am not getting a very courteous response and appreciation from Ms Hennessy. I have been called names, including Denny Crane, which I take some offence to. I do not know the context; I have asked for an explanation. I have also been likened to Kenneth Galbraith, for relevance I do not know why, and have also been called other names. I would appreciate you giving Ms Hennessy some guidance as to appropriate courtesies and allow me to finish my question to the minister about disability services.

The CHAIR — Thank you for the point of order. I think you have made it evident to the committee your view, and I am sure that Ms Hennessy will take on notice your comments —

Ms HENNESSY — I will.

The CHAIR — and deal with you more appropriately.

Mr O'BRIEN — Minister, in relation to disability services, I note that on pages 219–21 of budget paper 3 you have outlined significant major outputs, deliverables and performance measures. I note that a very large number of Victorians will access care and support and also the significant overall funding increase for disability services.

Members interjecting.

Mr O'BRIEN — I am failing to see what is so funny. I will tell you what: I am also offended by the state of the economy that you left this government to deal with. You talk about black holes — what about a 5.7 blow-out on the desalination plant? That sort of thing I find much more offensive than any language or discourtesy you show to me or this committee.

The CHAIR — Thank you.

Mr O'BRIEN — I ask you again, Minister: what is the government doing to ensure that all Victorians with a disability can access the care and support they need?

The CHAIR — Before I call on the minister, I indicate to the committee that, like every matter we have before us, this portfolio is important. It is quite clear that there are stakeholders who are interested in matters relating to the minister's portfolio who would like to know that the members of the committee treat the portfolio with respect. I would like to see that the committee members treat one another and the minister before us with respect. Minister, please continue.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Mr O'Brien, for your question. It is a really important one. This budget makes a significant new investment in disability services, and I am very pleased in relation to that. What we have inherited is a disability support register with over 3000 people waiting for it as at December 2010, languishing on what is essentially a waiting list. They have been identified as needing support now, be that supported accommodation, day services or support to live in the community, and they are unable to get off that list and access the services they need. Community visitors have long made the point that there is a serious lack of respite, and the Auditor-General has called disability services and disability accommodation crisis driven. It is an area of significant need, and we are, through this budget, making some inroads in relation to that.

We are investing in supported accommodation and also respite and trying to be much more innovative in relation to how that is delivered in the future. There are lots of good ideas out there and we want to tap into them and think creatively about how we can maximise our new investment in relation to that area. We are investing in new aids and equipment funding as well as some significant lapsing programs that needed to have the funding. Of course, as I have mentioned, there is a huge boost for students with a disability through special schools and other supports.

We also know that the system is fundamentally broken overall and that reform is needed. An important part of the coalition government's future vision for disability services is a national disability insurance scheme. In addition to investments we are making, we are both investing in the shorter term and planning for the longer term and working very proactively. The Productivity Commission has recently done their interim report in relation to an NDIS and said that the current system is inequitable, underfunded, fragmented and inefficient and giving people with a disability little choice, and we agree. We want this to be different in the future for people with a disability, so we are taking a very proactive role in relation to helping to try to make an NDIS a reality. The Premier at COAG — once the final report is released — got the NDIS onto the COAG agenda later on this year. I was able to initiate a meeting of community services ministers to talk specifically about the NDIS and start to have those discussions about what we need to remove the impediments. Victoria has put up its hand to develop a common assessment tool, which will be one of the critical things for having an NDIS in the future. We will be working very strongly to be ready to host a pilot of the NDIS in 2014 in line with the Productivity Commission's recommendations.

We believe that we do need to invest now. There are long waiting lists, there is lots of need and there are lots of gaps that have not been addressed by the previous government, but we also think that fundamentally the system is broken and that we need to reform for the future, and that is what we are working towards for people with a disability, their families and carers.

Mr PAKULA — Minister, I want to ask you about the justice system as it interacts with your portfolio. On slide 5 you have an output for youth justice about support, prevention and rehabilitation to reduce reoffending, but you have also made comments about justice as it relates to comments you made back in February — with which I agree — about the intellectually disabled and about the justice system being a frightening and confusing place for people with an intellectual disability and their families and carers.

I also agree with the desire to support prevention and rehab to reduce reoffending, and you may have seen an article in the paper last week which talked about youth justice centres as crime schools and the need to keep young people away from them whenever possible, but your government has a stated policy commitment to bring in mandatory minimum sentences for violent assault, and that policy applies also to those under 18 — I think your policy is four years for over 18s and two years mandatory jail time for young offenders under 18. I am wondering how you correlate that promise with your stated desire here to deter reoffending and keep young people away from the justice system wherever possible.

Ms WOOLDRIDGE — I thank the member for his question because it is a very important one. We do not shy away from tackling people who perpetrate violent crime. We believe that there are very significant measures to be taken and messages to be sent in relation to that, and nowhere do we say that we do not think we need a youth justice system for young people who are committing serious offences.

What we are saying in this budget, and with the investments we are making, is that there are many young people who end up in remand alongside violent offenders, and what we want to do — and it was identified in the Ombudsman's report — is deal with the fact that that mingling can actually have a detrimental effect for those on remand who may never be sentenced to incarceration. We want to be able to divert those who have the potential to be diverted while making sure we have youth justice facilities and decision making around sentencing that addresses serious offenders. So I think the two sit very comfortably together.

The third thing I would add is that we have to make sure that the support services we have for people who are in youth justice actually help them rehabilitate and get their lives back on track. One of the things that the Ombudsman identified was access to mental health services, which for many young people who are in youth justice and who are affected by mental illness are virtually non-existent, so we also need to ensure that those who are committing crimes, who are serious offenders and who are incarcerated can get support so that when they exit those facilities they have the best possible chance, because at the moment the recidivism rates are significant.

Mr PAKULA — Just to clarify, I was certainly not suggesting that youth detention centres would not remain part of the picture; I was querying the mandatory nature of the sentencing. Nevertheless, in regard to the other point that I raised about people with an intellectual disability, to the extent that you can, as the community services minister, can you undertake that judges will always — always — be able to consider an intellectual disability as a mitigating factor when they pass sentence?

The CHAIR — Thank you, Deputy Chair, I am not sure that the minister is competent to— —

Mr PAKULA — To the extent that she is competent.

The CHAIR — Okay.

Ms WOOLDRIDGE — What we have identified is a very serious concern in relation to the intersection of people with an intellectual disability and the justice system, which is why we have done a referral to a parliamentary committee to actually look at all of the aspects and how people with an intellectual disability interact with the justice system, what supports are there, how decision making happens, what happens in the court — all of those aspects.

I see this as a very significant opportunity to put all sorts of recommendations on the table, to look into it in detail, to engage in the sector, to engage with people with intellectual disabilities and their families, to engage with the justice system, to make sure that people with an intellectual disability are being treated appropriately by the justice system, because the feedback I am getting currently is that there is a gap and that that is not happening.

That is why we have the parliamentary inquiry. We look forward to and will be supporting that inquiry, to maximise outcomes. The sector has been thrilled and the public advocate is thrilled. The public advocate has long highlighted the gap between people with an intellectual disability and the way they are treated by the justice system, and we see this as a real opportunity to identify those gaps and if needed, make change.

The CHAIR — I turn to budget paper 3, page 119, and in particular the part relating to water and sewerage concessions. As a matter of course we know that there are significant cost-of-living pressures on families, and one area of increasing concern in the community is water across the state. I know certainly in Gippsland but also in Melbourne and in all parts of the state as well water prices have been escalating at an incredible rate, and in particular water costs for Melbourne Water consumers are escalating obviously because of the legacy of decisions made by the previous government. I therefore ask, Minister: can you inform the committee what the government is doing with this budget to assist families with the cost of water and sewerage bills?

Ms WOOLDRIDGE — Thank you very much, Chair. Victorian water customers have seen and are continuing to see water prices and their water bills increase significantly. I think we are in the fourth year of a five-year regulatory period, and it was foreshadowed that the prices would double over that five-year period. Water prices are expected to increase in the next financial year by about 11 per cent plus CPI. They are the numbers from Yarra Valley Water, and it varies slightly among the different retailers.

We know that families facing financial hardship often have to make some very difficult decisions about what bills they can pay, whether they have to borrow money in relation to their bills, whether they delay essential purchases or even put off buying food to pay those bills. In recent discussions I have had with Yarra Valley Water they have been saying the number of applicants for hardship grants has been increasing, so there is no doubt the increasing water prices are having a direct impact on vulnerable families.

Because we are very concerned about these rising water prices, we wanted to understand what was happening with the concessions. What was budgeted to happen was an increase in the concessions of 3.1 per cent, well below the cost of the increasing water bills. We decided that the position that was going to happen — the 3.1 per cent increase — was not appropriate and that a significant increase in the water concession cap needed to occur so that we could continue to try to ease the pressure on families who were really facing challenges with cost-of-living expenses.

This budget makes a \$62.9 million investment over four years to increase the water and sewerage concession from 1 July for low-income and vulnerable Victorians to assist with the cost of rising water prices. This is reflected in the budget paper. What that means is that the maximum water and sewerage concession will increase from \$245 to just under \$270. We expect that about 700 000 low income households will benefit from this concession as a result. In fact 32 000 households will actually access it for the first time. That will make a very significant difference to these households.

As you mentioned there is lots of pressure on increasing water costs through decisions that were made previously. We want to do all we can to alleviate the pressure on household bills, and increasing the cap by this significant amount on the water and sewerage concession is going to make a good inroad. There are other concessions that we have made significant investments in relation to as well, and if you are interested I would be very pleased to elaborate further later, but the water concession is very significant. It is a \$62 million investment that will go to the heart of some of those pressures that vulnerable families are facing. It has been widely welcomed, and I have to say that in particular COTA — identifying seniors — said that they think it is an absolute benefit and will alleviate some of these pressures, which we were very pleased about.

Mr SCOTT — Minister, I refer you to budget paper 3, page 217 and the output summary for the Department of Human Services. I also refer you to a letter was sent by Mr Terry Barnes, your former chief of staff, to Plenty Valley Community Health dated 20 March 2011, which I am happy to table, which makes reference to the delivery of respite facilities in the city of Whittlesea. The letter seems to imply that your government was advising that these beds were an unfunded election commitment, when I have been informed that they were budgeted for in the 2010–11 budget.

Minister, will these beds still be delivered to the localities they were intended for, being the local government areas of Whittlesea, Frankston and the Latrobe Valley, and if so, how much longer before the people with

disabilities and their carers are able to access what I have been informed were previously funded additional facility-based respite beds in their local community?

Ms WOOLDRIDGE — Thank you very much; I appreciate the question. I had the pleasure of heading out to Whittlesea as the shadow minister to meet with the residents there and to understand the massive gap they have had between the need for respite services and the fact that they had no respite services. This has been a longstanding position in the community of Whittlesea, and in fact the failure to deliver any respite services had caused them to undertake a significant campaign in relation to it to the former government.

As you say, there was a commitment in relation to additional respite beds that I have said publicly — I have said to the paper, and we have said to anyone who is interested and who has asked — we will be completely honouring in relation to that additional respite facility in Whittlesea that was announced by the previous government. We will be delivering. In fact I am very pleased that some land has been purchased. We are progressing well in relation to that. We need to engage with the local residents to make sure all of those appropriate actions take place. We do not like residents to find out about new government facilities through the media or through people knocking on their door. We will engage with the residents around that site and make sure that we do everything we can.

It is a respite facility that is integrated into the community and supported by the community, and I know it is going to be significantly welcomed by people with a disability, their families and carers in Whittlesea who do not have, and have not ever had, respite facilities in the community. They will now have it, which I think is a very positive improvement for that community.

Mr SCOTT — Just a point of clarification. While I certainly welcome the honouring of the commitment of the previous government to respite facilities in Whittlesea, I am still bewildered then as to why it was referred to as an unfunded promise in this letter to the community?

The CHAIR — Are you referring to a reference to the previous government's unfunded promise?

Mr SCOTT — No, it is not unfunded. The minister confirmed that in her answer.

Ms WOOLDRIDGE — It is a very easy explanation, because there were additional commitments made by the local member in relation to respite facilities during the election campaign that were above and beyond the facility promised and funded in the previous budget. These are two distinct issues.

The community of Whittlesea and the local paper and the residents from RAW who are in this campaign have said, 'We are actually pleased with that facility, but we want more'. What I have said is that we are not going to fulfil the election commitment made by the local member during the election campaign; that was not one of our commitments. We will fulfil the commitment in relation to the previously funded position. But the residents of Whittlesea, the local council and the community health centre are very welcome to apply for our new innovative respite supported accommodation funding. As I have said, there are various growth pressures, and we would welcome some good ideas about further options in that community to be considered with the other communities that apply for the funding.

Mr MORRIS — Minister, could I turn to the subject of out-of-home care. Page 49 of budget paper 3 refers to a significant funding boost for out-of-home care. I think we are all mindful of the Ombudsman's report of last year about the way out-of-home care was being handled at that time. Certainly it found that some children and indeed young people, far from being kept safe, were being subjected to further abuse and further neglect while in out-of-home care. Minister, I ask you to provide the committee with a little more detail on the additional funding for out-of-home care and in particular how it will be used to protect vulnerable children.

Ms WOOLDRIDGE — Thank you very much for the question. It is a very important one, as you say. Anyone who read the Ombudsman's report could not help but be moved by the case studies, the language and the message in relation to what was happening in out-of-home care. There is just one particular section I would like to mention, because it focused my mind on the need to make sure we are investing in this area. The Ombudsman says on page 9:

... some children do not experience out-of-home care placements as the secure and safe environment they should be. Rather, they are subjected to further abuse and neglect.

It is a very challenging environment. These children have had very complex lives; they have very difficult situations. But we are committed to making a significant difference in relation to out-of-home care. We are working very hard on the recommendations that the Ombudsman put forward for the changes that need to happen. In addition to that, there is a number of other things that we are doing to try to change the outcomes, particularly in residential care, which is the area for young people who cannot live with a foster carer, are not with a kinship carer and are in a separate facility.

Some of the commitments that we have made include undertaking assessments when they enter of their mental health, health and educational status, and getting them additional help to try to catch up with what they have missed out on because of their experience of abuse and neglect. We are also working on the transition — what happens when leave out-of-home care. When you look at the youth justice numbers, you see that 30 per cent of those in youth justice have had child protection involvement. We want to help young people transitioning from out-of-care to have the skills, capabilities and ability to get a job so that they can get on their own two feet and be independent. So we are investing in transition.

We are also investing in the support facilities themselves, such as foster carers having funding to be able to continue the out-of-home care placements. There is an average of nearly 6000 children in out-of-home care on any one day. We have to care for them; that is our statutory obligation. Obviously we choose to, but it is a lot of pressure. We will have over 300 new placements as a result of the funding that is in this budget, and some residential care options as well for people who have more complex needs.

We are investing in the experience of young people, but we are also investing in the placements themselves. As I have said, this is a longer term agenda. More reform is needed, and we are working on that currently. We will look to the inquiry that we have going on to give us more recommendations in relation to it. But I was very pleased that the Brotherhood of St Laurence, in commenting about our out-of-home care initiatives, said that:

The commitment to ensure that young people coming out of state care are on a pathway to further education and ultimately employment begins to rectify a longstanding problem that has curtailed their life chances.

That has to be our goal: to give them the best possible chances in life, despite the challenges they have faced in getting to that point. It is not easy; it is never going to be easy. But it is something that we are very committed to, and we really want to make that difference.

Ms HENNESSY — Minister, I refer you to the general output summary for the Department of Human Services at BP3, page 217. Can the minister indicate whether the recommendation of the bushfire royal commission to establish a vulnerable people's register was in operation during the floods this year?

Ms WOOLDRIDGE — I will have to refer that question to the Deputy Premier, who has responsibility for the bushfire response. We have undertaken a number of initiatives in relation to our bushfire response. We have extended what was bushfire case management and through an extensive consultation process have morphed that into a new program to support bushfire-vulnerable communities and the work that they are doing to get their lives back on track. But in terms of the specific register, I need to refer that to the minister with direct responsibility.

The CHAIR — Do you have a relevant follow-up question?

Ms HENNESSY — Yes, I do, Chair. My follow-ups are always relevant.

The CHAIR — Not always.

Ms HENNESSY — Minister, do you say that a vulnerable people's register is not your responsibility?

The CHAIR — I thought the minister had explicitly answered that.

Ms HENNESSY — I just want to clarify that that was in fact what she was saying.

Ms WOOLDRIDGE — I am just getting some further advice on that. While the overall response has been under the Deputy Premier, as he has had responsibility for the implementation of all the bushfire royal commission initiatives, we are working as part of that on the vulnerable people register, and that work is still under way.

The CHAIR — It is a departmental function? I am just trying to help Ms Hennessy clarify it.

Ms WOOLDRIDGE — Yes. The overall response obviously is for the Deputy Premier, but we are working in relation to that register to get it delivered.

Ms HENNESSY — So that register will sit in your portfolio?

Ms WOOLDRIDGE — It will ultimately sit under DHS.

Mr PAKULA — Chair, if the minister's further examination determines that the vulnerable people's register is her responsibility, could she then take the original question that she was going to refer off on notice for response by her?

The CHAIR — I am sure she would be delighted to do that.

Ms WOOLDRIDGE — We will take it on notice, Chair.

Mr ANGUS — Minister, I refer you to budget paper 3, page 222, and the output 'Statutory child protection services'. I note that the total output cost there includes funding for the establishment of an independent children and young persons commissioner. That in fact is an initiative that has been called for some time and has not happened, but now it seems it will be happening, which is a very good thing. I note also that you mentioned it in passing in your commentary at the start of this session. So, Minister, I ask: how will the establishment of this position improve transparency of the child protection system, and how will this lead to better outcomes for vulnerable Victorian children?

Ms WOOLDRIDGE — Thank you, Mr Angus, for your question. Interestingly Victoria is actually the only state that does not have some form of an independent commissioner in relation to children and young people, and this has been the source of an ongoing debate for a number of years. There has been strong advocacy for an independent role, including some very clear points in relation to the two Ombudsman's reports into child protection about the lack of independence in relation to the child safety commissioner's role and his capacity to be as effective as he should be in the role because he does not have that independence. I am very pleased that we have funding in this budget and a commitment to deliver an independent children and young persons commissioner. We believe that will add significantly to that.

There is no doubt that it is a complex system, and having someone not only with the ability to receive referrals from the minister but who can initiate own-motion investigations into children who have been abused and neglected is going to actually add some of that transparency, add some of that investigation capacity and give confidence to the community. It took two own-motion investigations from the Ombudsman in order to really I suppose expose the challenges of the child protection system. Having an independent children and young persons commissioner who is appointed by the Governor in Council, not by the minister, who has the ability to independently report to the Parliament and who has those own-motion powers will actually significantly add to that.

There has been a lot of support for our position in relation to delivering this, and we think this will lead to better outcomes for vulnerable children. The child protection sector thinks it will. YACVic, the peak youth organisation, thinks it is going to make a real difference for young people as well. It is very consistent with this government's position on accountability and transparency that we are able to deliver an independent children and young persons commissioner as part of this budget and as part of the legislative reform that will be needed to make it able to be established.

Mr ANGUS — Thank you.

Mr PAKULA — Minister, budget paper 3 at page 119 has an output 'Child protection demand', and that shows that \$5 million has been allocated for new child protection staff and supervisors in the next financial year. What target did you set as a consequence of that increased funding for child protection staff numbers to reduce the number of unallocated cases within the system in 2011–12? That is pretty straightforward.

Ms WOOLDRIDGE — The unallocated cases have been a real concern in terms of the numbers, and it has been as a direct response of not having the workforce either in place or retained to be able to deliver to those unallocated cases. Our benchmark is that we saw about 18 months ago that Gippsland children were 62 per cent

unallocated. That is the height of how bad it can get in relation to unallocated cases, and we certainly will be working very hard to keep that number as low as we possibly can. Numbers have come down over time. I think when the Ombudsman reported it was around 21 or 22 per cent. I think it got up to 26 per cent overall in relation to unallocated cases right across the state. We will be working hard to get that number as low as possible. The more children who have caseworkers the more likely they are to be able to get the support, the attention and the care they need at very difficult times throughout their experiences.

What we are also facing, though, as you would have seen from the chart with the increase in demand, is that there are more children entering the child protection system both from population growth and from knowledge of the child protection system and then entering. We have two challenges: one is to bring down the number of unallocated cases that we inherited, and the second is to do that in the context of the increasing growth of numbers of children in the system. The new workers will go part of the way to addressing that, but the reform of the child protection workforce that I talked about earlier — getting actually 160 new workers at the front line delivering services — will go even further.

My objectives are to keep those numbers as low as we possibly can and to make sure that the workforce that is in place is retained and has the capacity to take on appropriate workloads with the skills and expertise they need. That is what will deliver that.

Mr PAKULA — Just to follow up, Minister, you were saying that the percentage of unallocated cases is coming down, and you mentioned Gippsland. Can you tell us, as a snapshot now, if we looked at, say, Gippsland as one example and the north-west, as the two extremes, what the unallocated percentage is today in those two regions?

Ms WOOLDRIDGE — I am happy to say that we are currently at a statewide number of around 8 per cent are unallocated cases currently. We have brought that down since we have been in government from 13 per cent, so we have actually achieved a significant reduction in unallocated cases over the five months that we have been in place. Part of that is our retention strategy that we have in place, delivering better training and local initiatives on retention and those sorts of things, and we will continue to work to keep that number as low as we possibly can.

Mr PAKULA — My question was about Gippsland and the north-west.

Mr ANGUS — You have got the answer overall.

Ms WOOLDRIDGE — And the number I gave you was the statewide number.

Mr PAKULA — Yes, but that is not what I asked. Chair, will the minister take my question on notice?

The CHAIR — I am sure the minister is happy to take questions on notice, but the issue I thought you raised in fact was ‘for example’.

Mr PAKULA — No, I said Gippsland and the north-west as two examples.

Ms HENNESSY — Where there is an issue.

Ms WOOLDRIDGE — And both of them are approximately 12 per cent. So both of them still sit above the statewide average and a significant challenge is there still.

The CHAIR — That satisfies the deputy?

Mr PAKULA — Yes.

Mr O'BRIEN — I would like to take you, Minister, to concessions, to pensioners and beneficiaries as outlined on pages 227 and 228 of budget paper 3. That details various concessions. I also note the Treasurer's speech about the rising costs of living pressures in budget paper 1, in particular for those on low incomes who are struggling to meet the costs of rising bills and also for families. I ask, Minister: what is the government doing through this budget to relieve the pressure on families which are struggling to deal with the rising costs of electricity?

Ms WOOLDRIDGE — Thanks very much, Mr O'Brien, for giving me the opportunity to talk about our year-round electricity concession, because there is no doubt this is going to make a huge difference for families. Skyrocketing electricity prices are putting on incredible pressure. What we do know is that not only do people need to heat their houses in wintertime, they also need to cool their homes in summertime. In fact many deaths, particularly of elderly people, occur in summertime because they cannot afford to put their air conditioning on or turn their fans on to stay cool. Heat-related deaths over the summer months are actually reasonably significant.

What this commitment of the Baillieu government is doing is moving a concession of 17.5 per cent, which was available for six months of the year, to 12 months of the year so that people who need a bit of help to pay their bills and to ease that pressure can have confidence that they can turn air conditioners on or fans on and stay cool in the summer as well stay warm in winter. About 850 000 low-income households access this electricity concession — that is about 1.5 million people in total — and about 38 000 new households will actually access this electricity concession for the first time. This is putting hundreds of dollars back into the pockets of vulnerable families. In fact the investment that we are making is \$380 million over the forward estimates in relation to delivering this commitment.

The good news as well in addition to that is that the people who receive the medical cooling concession and previously got a 17.5 per cent concession in the summer months because they needed to stay cool as a result of medical conditions such as multiple sclerosis, for example, will now actually receive a 35 per cent reduction. So they will retain their existing concession and this new concession will go on top of that. That is a very significant concession for people who have illnesses that require cooling. Non-mains energy concession recipients will also receive this. A very important part was to bring forward this concession from 1 July, which was our election commitment, to 1 March so that families were actually able to access this earlier.

Ms HENNESSY — 1 January was the Premier's commitment.

Ms WOOLDRIDGE — This is a substantial improvement in relation to this concession. The interesting thing is that the advice we received was that we should not do it. Treasury actually told us that we should not be bringing forward the concession from 1 July. This was advice that we considered, but we decided that it was more important to put dollars in the pockets of families that were struggling with the costs of living pressures they were experiencing and that it was doable.

Mr PAKULA — It is good to know that they can talk about Treasury advice.

Ms HENNESSY — Interesting.

Ms WOOLDRIDGE — We engaged with the energy retailers. They told us they could do it, and they have delivered it. So we are very pleased that this significant investment for vulnerable families has been delivered.

Mr PAKULA — I hope you are as forthcoming the next time we ask you about Treasury advice.

Ms HENNESSY — We are pleased it is in play.

Mr MORRIS — It will depend on the nature of the advice, won't it?

Mr PAKULA — Whether it helps you or hurts you.

Mr SCOTT — Minister, I refer you to go budget paper 4, page 34 and a reference to the Melbourne Youth Justice Centre refurbishment.

Ms WOOLDRIDGE — Which page was that, sorry?

The CHAIR — Paper 4, page 34.

Mr SCOTT — Correct; good to know you were listening, Chair.

The CHAIR — I am always listening; sometimes you do not articulate as well as you might, but I heard you this time.

Ms HENNESSY — I thought we had a moratorium on insults, Chair.

The CHAIR — I was just being instructive. Would you like to continue, Mr Scott?

Mr SCOTT — I will; and I notice the slightly surly Chair this afternoon. I would like to refer you also to the Ombudsman's October 2010 investigation into conditions at the Melbourne Youth Justice Precinct and the July 2010 Neil Comrie report on the review of the escape incident at the Melbourne Youth Justice Centre on 19 May 2010. Can the minister advise if there is now a single entry point at the facility and whether the staff entry searches have been implemented yet as recommended?

Ms WOOLDRIDGE — As I mentioned in my earlier response, that is exactly one of the things that is happening with this funding. That work is currently under way to deliver that single entry point. The previous facility had a number of entry points which actually compromised the security of the facility. That work is well under way to having that single entry point and delivering on the recommendations in relation to the Ombudsman's report.

Mr SCOTT — As a supplementary then, could the minister advise the committee on what recommendations of the report have been currently implemented and what the time line is on those that are yet to be implemented?

Ms WOOLDRIDGE — Let me get my notes, given the detail of that. Thank you for that. They were two very comprehensive reports that had significant issues, and I actually did outline earlier that security and compliance issues, physical condition issues, services to young people, workforce issues and the long-term planning were some of the issues in relation to it.

We have made substantial progress against the recommendations in the review — for example, the construction of the single entry point that is going to allow for searching of all people entering the precinct and will improve the boundary security of the current site to promote community safety. Other security improvements include installing CCTV throughout the precinct and scaling up supervision and compliance monitoring at night; addressing the unacceptable conditions on the site: bathrooms, bedrooms, passageways and common areas; bolstering education and programs; and managing discipline cases very carefully.

This budget, as I have said, has over \$4 million for staff training, which was one of the key recommendations in relation to the report, and making sure we have got the workforce to deliver. We are well progressed on many of the recommendations, as you see, in relation to that issue, but I will say that we have also invested, as I have mentioned, \$1 million to plan for the future of the site. That does not happen overnight. We are investing in longer term thinking about what needs to happen with youth justice facilities that had not happened previously, and we need a plan. We have already put funding towards that planning for the longer term to ensure that we have appropriate youth justice facilities.

Mr SCOTT — The question was related to a time line; if I could have that on notice.

The CHAIR — Indeed, I am sure the minister can provide further information if she is able to.

Ms WOOLDRIDGE — Chair, we are well under way. Certainly the planning will take a longer period of time, but if there is further detail that would enhance the members understanding of my response, I would be happy to provide it.

The CHAIR — Thank you Minister. That concludes the consideration of the budget estimates for the portfolios of mental health, women's affairs and community services, and day 10, the penultimate day of this series of estimates hearings. I thank the minister and departmental officers for their attendance today. It has been a very useful session.

Where questions were taken on notice and where there were unasked questions, the committee will follow up with you in writing at a later date. The committee requests that written responses to those matters be provided within 21 days. Thank you all very much for your attendance.

Committee adjourned.