

# TRANSCRIPT

## PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

### Budget Estimates 2019–20 (Child Protection)

Melbourne—Thursday, 13 June 2019

#### Members

Mr Philip Dalidakis—Chair

Mr Richard Riordan—Deputy Chair

Mr Sam Hibbins

Mr Gary Maas

Mr Danny O'Brien

Ms Pauline Richards

Mr Tim Richardson

Ms Ingrid Stitt

Ms Bridget Vallence

**WITNESSES**

Mr Luke Donnellan, Minister for Child Protection,

Ms Kym Peake, Secretary,

Ms Chris Asquini, Senior Deputy Secretary, Community Services Operations,

Mr Argiri Alisandratos, Deputy Secretary, Children and Families, and

Mr Greg Stenton, Deputy Secretary, Corporate Services, Department of Health and Human Services.

**The CHAIR:** Good evening, everybody, and welcome to the final session for today—and we have saved the best until last with you, Minister Donnellan. I declare open this hearing of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee. On behalf of the Parliament, the committee is conducting this inquiry into the 2019–20 Budget Estimates. Its aim is to scrutinise public administration and finance to improve outcomes for the Victorian community, now and forever. The committee will now begin consideration of the portfolio of child protection. It is a bit hard to be funny or amusing when you deal with child protection issues, so now I will be serious. I welcome the minister and the officials from the department and I thank the Honourable Luke Donnellan for appearing before us today.

All evidence given is protected by the Parliamentary Committees Act. This means that it attracts parliamentary privilege and is protected from judicial review. Witnesses found to be giving false or misleading evidence may be in contempt of Parliament and subject to range of penalties, and people can read through *Hansard* to establish exactly what I am referring to.

Minister, I invite you to make a brief presentation of no more than 10 minutes. This will be followed by questions from the committee that will leave you astounded at our brilliance and intelligence. Over to you, Minister.

**Mr DONNELLAN:** Thank you, Chair Dalidakis, and thank you to the committee members for the opportunity to talk today about the outcomes for the child protection portfolio.

**Visual presentation.**

**Mr DONNELLAN:** In the first slide you will see very much the history of investment in child protection by the Andrews Labor government. Over the five years the total increase is approximately \$2.5 billion, and this slide highlights the significant increase from when we came in government, because nothing is more important than protecting our most vulnerable children. Overall this year we are investing a total of \$1.5 billion in child protection services, excluding the impact of the transfer of activities to family violence service delivery, which represents approximately overall a 6.7 per cent increase, excluding the family violence service delivery. I should make the point of explaining this transfer. Under the machinery of government changes at the start of this term the family violence portfolio moved to Minister Williams, and a number of programs have moved from the child and families output to the family violence service delivery to better reflect these ministerial responsibilities. This equates to a total of approximately \$124.6 million in funding, but most importantly the service delivery and the programs themselves will remain unchanged.

In the next slide, it is not just the funding levels that very much have changed in this portfolio and increased over time; the government has also committed to a new approach to children and families needing support during the last term. *Roadmap to Reform: Strong Families, Safe Children* was launched in April 2016 and is trialling and targeting new approaches to better support vulnerable children and their families. In effect it is a policy transformation that pivots the child and families sector from crisis response very much to early intervention and prevention. It is guided by the road map implementation ministerial advisory group, which I met with yesterday, which is made up of all key community organisation carer groups, child protection officials and advocacy organisations in partnership to help influence and drive reforms which will deliver the most benefit to vulnerable children and their families. This approach was supported by key investments in last year's budget of \$858.6 million, which was built upon previous investments and is continued again this year.

Key aspects of the reform include trials to support new approaches and models of care, with a strong evidence-based approach to understanding the impact on preserving and reunifying families. Additional and specialised support for Aboriginal children and families as a further step in Aboriginal self-determination. This support is aimed at ensuring Aboriginal children are placed with Aboriginal carers wherever possible and that case management is transitioned to Aboriginal community-controlled organisations.

In the next slide you will note it very much just highlights the number of child protection officers that we have funded over the various budgets. There could hardly be anything more demanding or important a job in our community than being a child protection officer, and over the last four years the Andrews Labor government has funded over 650 new full-time equivalent child protection practitioners positions. In 15–16 we funded 148. In 16–17 we added 12 positions. In 17–18 we added 453 positions, which was extended in the 18–19 budget for a further three years, and the 19–20 budget will add a further 44 positions. We know that there are increasing reports to child protection, which results in an increasing number of investigations, which in turn places a burden on our staff, but our sustained investment in additional staff over a number of years is very much making a difference.

At the end of April 2019—this year—there was a turnover of approximately 12.8 per cent of staff for child protection case managers. This compares to a turnover rate of 15.3 per cent in 2015–16 and 16.6 per cent in 16–17. We have also broadened our recruitment processes to get more qualified candidates. Since January 2017 over 143 overseas recruits and 83 interstate professionals have been recruited, with more than 90 candidates in the recruitment pipeline. Over the same period 565 high-potential students have completed a placement in child protection, with 44 subsequently taking on practitioner roles. This is paying dividends in other ways as well. As of May 2019, 55 Aboriginal staff were employed in child protection, which was 2.5 per cent of the child protection workforce and above the broader departmental employment desire of approximately 2 per cent.

In terms of this year and the 19–20 budget the Andrews government is investing an additional \$260.6 million in child protection services, programs and agencies to protect and promote the wellbeing of vulnerable children and their families. This investment continues the children and families reform agenda which, as I have detailed, shifts the focus from crisis and response very much to early intervention and prevention. More specifically this budget in terms of highlights has allocated \$116.1 million to continue the new model of kinship care that will identify carers earlier, strengthen community connections for Aboriginal children in care and deliver better, more flexible support to carers. Funding will provide dedicated kinship care workers to identify kinship networks earlier, reunite more children safely with their families and improve placement stability. There is also \$41.8 million to provide placements in out-of-home care, including children with complex disabilities in voluntary placements. There is also \$36.6 million to progress the government's reform agenda, focusing on early intervention and diversion.

Trials of three innovative new models of out-of-home care—Treatment Foster Care Oregon, Keep Embracing Your Success and Sibling Support and Placement Service—will be maintained to build the evidence base for initiatives that support children to reach their potential. This will also continue the transfer of case management of Aboriginal children to Aboriginal-controlled organisations.

Thirty million dollars will be allocated to better assist children in the statutory child protection system. These workers will respond to reports, with an expansion of mandatory reporting of child physical or sexual abuse to groups such as early childhood workers, youth justice workers and registered psychologists. And \$16 million will be provided to the Commission for Children and Young People to administer the reportable conduct scheme and child safe standards. This investment means that over the past five budgets, as I mentioned a bit earlier, the Andrews Labor government has invested an additional \$2.5 billion in child protection services.

In terms of out-of-home care—the system as it stands now—this graph before us highlights that there were almost 8000 children in care as of 30 June 2018. The majority of these were in kinship care, which is now almost 5500 children, and approximately 1600 in foster care. Including permanent care, there were 10 300 children in out-of-home care in Victoria during 17–18. It is worth noting that permanent care is reflected separately, which is consistent with reporting in other states and territories and reporting to the national government. Most importantly, we consider residential care as a percentage of the overall out-of-home care is declining over time as the focus is increased on finding home-based placement wherever possible. This result

has been made possible by the increased support for home-based carers and particularly the kinship carers, as we have seen with the investment in the new model of kinship care.

Of course, it does not mean the onus is not on us to find and retain carers, which is a challenge and remains an enormously difficult task, but that is why we are putting resources into helping identify suitable family networks to set up as carers. We know that kinship placement does provide a lot more stability and a sense of being part of, I guess, a family more than anything else. We are also continuing to run campaigns to attract foster carers.

Lastly—the national comparison of Victoria’s out-of-home care. This slide sets out Victoria’s out-of-home care system in comparison to other states. Of course not all states operate in the same way, but what we can see is that in Victoria we have had a rate of, at least then, 5.8 children per 1000 in out-of-home care compared to the national average of 8.3 children per 1000 in out-of-home care. So Victoria has the lowest rate of children in out-of-home care of any Australian state. That is a positive outcome. It very much reflects the efforts that Victoria puts into placement, prevention and child protection efforts to prioritise family unification and permanency arrangements for children.

However, let us be clear: demand for child protection is growing. There has been an 8.6 per cent increase in demand for out-of-home care over the last three years. Through population increase and also through the expansion of mandatory reporting and a range of other factors, we are seeing more of these reports to child protection. That is very much why, through the *Roadmap for Reform*, our government is strengthening early intervention and prevention efforts. We are trialling new and innovative service models for children in or at risk of entering care, as well as models of improved residential care delivery, with a focus on multidisciplinary treatment and support. Thank you very much.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Minister, and thank you also for managing to finish up a minute ahead of time. We will move straight into questions, and we move to Mr Richardson.

**Mr RICHARDSON:** Thank you, Minister, and representatives of the department for joining us this evening. Minister, I refer you to budget paper 3 and page 216, regarding kinship care. How will new kinship care workers assist to keep children in stable placements with family members and out of residential care?

**Mr DONNELLAN:** First of all, we need to be clear that under the Children, Youth and Families Act there are best-interest principles which state that consideration must be given first to the child being placed with an appropriate family member—first and foremost—or another person significant to the child, before any other placement is considered. In other words, we very much give priority to placing children at risk in kinship care; that is very much our preferred model of out-of-home care. We found that it very much is associated with better health, education, economic and wellbeing outcomes for children in out-of-home care relative to other placement types. Kinship care provides greater stability, preserves family connections, promotes cultural identity and helps reduce separation trauma.

As the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse heard, placing a child with relatives or kin increases the likelihood that he or she will grow up and know that they are loved, they are claimed, they belong—that essential human need we have to be anchored, to belong, to be claimed, to have someone who delights in you, and that is very much why we believe kinship care is the best way of actually dealing with out-of-home care.

But evidence shows that maintaining a child’s connections to the family, community and culture is critical to reducing the trauma associated with removal from the home, enabling healing from past abuse and neglect and supporting protective factors. As the royal commission heard, placing a child with kin may help offset some of the psychic trauma, providing the child with a familiar environment, with known caregivers, and maintaining a perceived warmth and safety of family during the placement process.

Despite this statutory position, evidence suggests that carers, children and young people in kinship care were insufficiently supported under the previous models we had. In prioritising placement of children and young people in care with kin, there is a need to cater for the distinct needs of kinship carers. Even though they frequently face the same issues, kinship carers have different motivations, intentions and experiences to foster

carers. So many of them will be grandmothers virtually taking care of their daughter's child, so those situations are difficult and they need an enormous level of support because of those unusually difficult relationships in those instances. So on 1 March 2018 the Andrews government introduced a new model of kinship care, one which provides additional support to identify the best and the most appropriate family members to take on the care of the children, and additional workers to support the family once they do so. So I am delighted to confirm that, as I mentioned a little bit earlier, in the 19-20 budget we have provided \$106 million over four years to make this model a permanent feature of the child protection system. This is very much an important part of the *Roadmap for Reform* agenda, which is transforming the child and family system from crisis to early intervention and prevention. The *Roadmap for Reform* aims to see more children in stable, out-of-home care.

The introduction of 36 kinship workers in each of the department's 17 areas will provide kinship carers with a dedicated departmental contact point so their needs can be met more quickly. This will in turn enable kinship carers to provide high-quality, stable environments for children and young people and reduce placement breakdowns—in other words, it will ensure greater placement stability. If we can achieve greater placement stability, this of course ensures that those children are not at risk of moving into the residential care system, which is a less desirable and more impersonal emergency accommodation option.

The 36 kinship care workers are not intended to replace the role of child protection. They will very much play two functions: one, the early identification of kinship networks and the most appropriate kin; and the ongoing and flexible support to kinship care placements. This can include ensuring kinship placements have their care allowance, care authorisations, birth certificates, a Medicare card for their child, helping to respond to placement vulnerabilities and issues, completing annual assessments of care requirements for non-contracted cases, acting as a contact point for carer complaints and issues, and assisting kinship carers to navigate child protection processes.

The new model also includes extra case contracting of kinship cases to the community service organisations, and these CSOs will also be assisting new placements in the first three established months of placement. I should also note that many kinship carers would prefer to deal with CSOs, and that is very much why we have also funded community service organisations to provide such a service.

**Mr RICHARDSON:** Minister, I am wondering if you can take the committee through how this model will allow for more family reunifications?

**Mr DONNELLAN:** Well, it is very much a model whereby, I guess, because you are in the kin you have still got some connection to your parents, in a sense, whether it be mother or father. So it provides a sort of family environment where you still have that connection so that over time, depending on the levels of supports we can provide to mother or father and deal with their issues, at the appropriate time and in the appropriate circumstances there is the possibility to reunify. But obviously those issues, which might be things like family violence and the like, would very much need to be dealt with accordingly before we would consider placing the child back in the full-time care of the parent, if they had not dealt with those issues. But it does very much allow them to have that ongoing connection.

**Mr RICHARDSON:** Minister, what has been kinship carers reactions to the new model?

**Mr DONNELLAN:** I was at RIMAG yesterday. That is the advisory committee for the *Roadmap for Reform*. I was with them yesterday, and one of the ladies who is head of the kinship carers association highlighted just how happy she was, or her community—the group that she represents—were, with the support they are getting to actually make the placements so much easier. So universally it has been very much welcomed by those kinship carers because I think in many ways for some years we just assumed that because they were kin it would be straightforward. Well, that is probably not necessarily so. In a sense they do need that support, like anybody else. They do need that flexible funding in terms of getting a young person settled—maybe furniture in the house or things like that. Those little things go a long way to providing stability for the young one and providing greater ease for the kinship carer to actually provide that good support and love that they do. But generally I think, obviously for many years with the kinship care, we underprovided support. We are doing more appropriate support now than ever before, and it has been universally welcomed.

**Mr RICHARDSON:** Now stepping back into budget paper 3, page 216, I am wondering if you can outline for the committee how this budget supports Aboriginal self-determination or working to reduce the overrepresentation of Aboriginal children in out-of-home care?

**Mr DONNELLAN:** Yes. Look, first and foremost our Aboriginal community is well and truly overrepresented in out-of-home care, and that is something we have got, I guess, to acknowledge and actually deal with. In many ways it is only due to the strength and resilience of Victorian Aboriginal families that they have actually survived all the difficulties they have had to go through.

But the simple fact is, as I say, Aboriginal children are overrepresented in care in Victoria. Very many of the Aboriginal children have become disconnected from their kin, community, culture and country, and this as we know leads to terrible outcomes. For Aboriginal children, family is very much at the heart of their perception of permanence, belonging and identity. The Aboriginal child placement principle, which is enshrined in the Children, Youth and Families Act, states that Aboriginal children have a right to be raised in their families. Connection to these fundamental aspects of their lives, while accessing appropriate services, very much is expected to contribute to the healing and support and allow them to go on to achieve their full potential. This issue can only be addressed through Aboriginal self-determination, where government and mainstream organisations relinquish some control and very much give resources to Aboriginal organisations to make the best and appropriate decisions for Aboriginal children.

Victoria's Aboriginal communities need to be empowered to design, develop and deliver strategies that meet the needs of Aboriginal children, families and the communities. As with any child, it is the outcome, the wellbeing of the child that matters first and foremost. The Victorian government's commitment to self-determination is articulated in the *Korin Korin Balit-Djak: Aboriginal health, wellbeing and safety strategic plan 2017–2027* and the *Wungurilwil Gapgapduir: Aboriginal Children and Families Agreement*, a groundbreaking tripartite partnership between the Aboriginal communities, the Victorian government and community service organisations. So in the 18–19 budget we included \$53.3 million to support Wungurilwil Gapgapduir and ensure the Aboriginal community-controlled organisations take responsibility and have the skills and the resources to place Aboriginal children into Aboriginal care placements. And I can report that as of the end of April 2019, 45 per cent of children in Aboriginal care or on protection orders are already case managed by Aboriginal community-controlled organisations, and about 81 per cent of all Aboriginal children are placed with their relatives or in Aboriginal care. These are very much statistics we can be proud of. We have come a long way, but there is a lot to do.

In this budget we have committed a further \$5.6 million in 19–20 and \$8 million in 20–21 to continue this work as we strive to ensure self-determination within child protection. This \$13 million in new funding will be used to expand the Aboriginal children in Aboriginal care model. This model gives legal guardianship authority to the Aboriginal community-controlled organisation rather than the secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services. As part of this funding, this year a fourth ACCO—in other words, a fourth Aboriginal community-controlled organisation—will be authorised to provide guardianship services. We know these organisations are best placed to understand the unique issues affecting the Aboriginal community and are best placed to make decisions that are in the best interests of the child, which means that children are safe and supported at all times. It is a vitally important task, and that is why over the past four years the Andrews government has invested \$225 million in additional Aboriginal child and family services.

**Mr RICHARDSON:** Thank you, Minister. I am wondering on this important topic what other initiatives are in place to support Aboriginal children remaining connected to culture when they require support through the child protection system?

**Mr DONNELLAN:** Look, we are doing that work, but there is also other work. We are running an Aboriginal family reunification service. This service very much aims to support practitioners to find appropriate family networks for Aboriginal children to enable them to stay connected to their family and culture. That was an investment—I was talking about the kinship care earlier—of \$116 million; \$10 million of that is specifically provided for the Aboriginal community. It is provided because we know that Aboriginal children fare better when they are looked after by family members they know and they trust and when they stay connected to their own culture. It is very much a specialist service that supplements the kinship-finding service as part of the government's new model of kinship care.

Under this reunification service, packages of funding are allocated to Aboriginal organisations during the child's kinship placement to assist them to reunify with their immediate family. We are also continuing funding for a dedicated Aboriginal children and young people's commissioner. The commissioner is Justin Mohamed, and it has been very much a pleasure to work with him in the Aboriginal Children's Forum. I should also add that the Aboriginal Children's Forum is driving and overseeing the transfer of case management of children on protection orders and in care from child protection in non-Aboriginal community services to approved Aboriginal agencies.

When it comes to early intervention, to help address the overrepresentation of Aboriginal children in the system we are also providing priority access for Aboriginal families to Child FIRST assessment services to try and identify, minimise and address the risks of children before the abuse and the neglect take place and before they need to be removed.

**Mr RICHARDSON:** Thanks, Minister. I want to go through now the work of child protection workers, and they do an extraordinary job for our state in very difficult circumstances. I refer you again to budget paper 3, page 216. We know how critical it is to have sufficient child protection staff so that the caseloads are manageable and they have the time to spend in assessing the risks to children and supporting families. What will be the additional funding, and what will this mean for the size of this workforce?

**Mr DONNELLAN:** Well, as you would be aware, in terms of the original presentation, in terms of the allocation rate what we found when we came in—those cases allocated were about 81 per cent and there were obviously 19 per cent unallocated. Now, with the investments we have made, we have actually brought the allocation rate up to 90 per cent. But if you look at the total investment we have made—and I will just go back to the earlier presentation—in 15–16 we added 148 positions, in 16–17 12 positions and in 17–18 453 positions, and this budget will add another 44 positions. So overall we have added approximately another 650 child protection workers. We have also added administrative support for senior child protection workers. In other words, we have got junior child protection workers undertaking things like transportation, managing visits and also engaging in subpoenas and the like for the courts. So in other words what we have done is we have relieved the pressure on the senior child protection workers, who have to make the critical decisions, by providing them with more administrative support so they can focus on making those critical decisions they need to make in terms of the assessment of whether the child is in danger or otherwise—so over 650 extra child protection workers. I think we have got about 2069 child protection workers full-time equivalent now, so that is a massive increase, and it certainly relieves the burden in terms of the pressures on child protection workers.

**Mr RICHARDSON:** Minister, I am wondering if you could take us through what has led to an increase in the need for child protection workers. What is driving the demand across the system?

**Mr DONNELLAN:** Population growth is one, obviously. As you would be well aware, Victoria is the fastest-growing state in the country, and obviously that is putting extra pressure on. But we have also expanded our mandatory reporting, so the Andrews government is ensuring the safety and protection of services by expanding the list of mandatory reporters. That very much refers to the legal requirement of certain professional groups to report reasonable belief of child physical or sexual abuse to child protection authorities—people like medical practitioners, nurses, teachers and school principals included. From 1 March this year we have expanded this list to include those who work in out-of-home care, including voluntary kinship, foster and kinship carers, early childhood and youth justice workers as well as registered psychologists. School counsellors will be next, with mandatory reporting starting on 31 July 2020. Training will be provided to each of these professional groups so they are fully aware of their obligations.

So very much our government is committed during this election campaign to ending the special treatment of priests and people in religious ministries who are exempt from mandatory reporting laws. We will amend the Children, Youth and Families Act to make it mandatory to report information about child abuse or harm disclosed during confessions to child protection authorities. We will also introduce amendments to ensure that under the failure to report offence contained in the Crimes Act information disclosed in the context of religious confession is not exempt. I can report to the committee that this legislation is currently being drafted as we speak and will be very much done this year. It will acquit both recommendations 7.3 and 7.4 of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse to mandate a minimum set of mandatory reporters.

So it follows that unfortunately as we increase the number of mandatory reporters in this way it very much leads to an increase in the number of reports.

**Mr RICHARDSON:** In that difficult workload, Minister, and the job that our child protection workers do, how will you and the department maintain the good mental health of child protection workers?

**Mr DONNELLAN:** That very much came out of the VAGO report which identified the enormous pressures on child protection workers and the stress and the strain they see each day in their work. They undertake a heroic role because in a sense every day they are going to work they know that they are going to see some pretty ordinary things, and that is not one day a week, it is five days a week. It is an incredibly difficult job. Of course we value that job they do, and we want to ensure they remain well mentally and physically and that they are capable and skilled in doing their role.

That is very much why we introduced a child protection wellbeing program. This support program responds to the specific needs of the child protection workforce and will create a workplace culture that very much addresses occupational stress. As part of this program child protection practitioners and managers will undertake training to build their awareness of trauma and develop strategies to counter the impacts. A specialist support team will also proactively work with practitioners and managers to improve resilience and build their capacity to respond to complex and challenging situations.

Child protection staff will get up to six dedicated counselling sessions a year with qualified health clinicians that understand their specific work environment. That is in addition to the four one-on-one sessions they can already access, which are provided through the department of health general employee wellbeing support program. The establishment of the program directly responds, as I say, to the recommendations of the VAGO report released last May on maintaining the mental health of child practitioners, and we continue to consult and engage with the workforce to look at other ways to support them to ensure their wellbeing and their longevity in the job.

**Mr RICHARDSON:** Thanks, Minister. I want to take you to the *Roadmap for Reform* agenda. I refer you to budget paper 3, page 56, specifically 'Progressing the children and families reform agenda'. What innovative models of care are being introduced under the *Roadmap for Reform* to create effective pathways to support children and families to try and limit the number of kids who need to be in out-of-home care?

**Mr DONNELLAN:** There is much work we are doing in that space. As you will note in terms of the growth in demand for child protection and care services it has very much stabilised. So there are some positive signs there. Obviously we are doing work with kinship carers, as I have already detailed, but we are also doing some work with evidence-based programs such as SafeCare, functional family therapy, Family Foundations, Tuning into Kids and Teens, multisystemic therapy psychology and Treatment Foster Care Oregon—thousands of different names. I will quietly go and explain what these actually do.

The Home Stretch initiative is also being introduced from 2019 and will offer many 18-year-old young people leaving care the option of remaining with home-based carers until 21 years of age or support to live independently. Home Stretch very much recognises the vulnerability of young people who have been in care. Leaving home many of them end up homeless and many of them end up with some engagement with the justice system. It is very much about trying to support them at 18 years of age literally to find accommodation, to get their education sorted out and the like. If you have been through so much trauma, that is why we have introduced Home Stretch to ensure that we actually keep supporting children until they are at least 21 years of age, hopefully when they are ready to leave care.

We have also opened up support and safety hubs known as the Orange Door as a new service for women and children who are experiencing family violence. We have also put through a new information sharing scheme for child legislation, and that is very much about sharing information between the various professionals who are actually dealing with the children so they know what they are actually dealing with. In other words, for argument's sake, if a teacher has got a new student in there who has come from a very difficult background, at least the teacher will be aware of the difficulties this child has been through and actually be able to change and alter the pattern in terms of the pedagogy to suit that particular child. In other words it is about sharing

information between the professionals who might be with the justice system and the like so that people are aware of their background and we can actually provide better services to those young people.

**The CHAIR:** Minister, I am sorry to interrupt, but we will need to move on to the Deputy Chair.

**Mr RIORDAN:** Thank you, Minister and team. I refer to budget paper 3, pages 216 and 217, which set out the objective indicators in your portfolio—your KPIs, if you like. Do you agree that one of the KPIs is to reduce the number of children going into out-of-home care?

**Mr DONNELLAN:** When you say out-of-home care, do you mean residential care or just out-of-home care, full stop?

**Mr RIORDAN:** Just out-of-home care, generally.

**Mr DONNELLAN:** Of course, yes, and that is very much why—

**Mr RIORDAN:** It is a key performance indicator.

**Mr DONNELLAN:** Yes.

**Mr RIORDAN:** Okay. That is good. Can you explain to the committee why you are budgeting for a 14 per cent increase in the number of children in out-of-home care placements since last year?

**Mr DONNELLAN:** Because, as I was explaining a little bit earlier, we have obviously got population growth, which means that as the population grows there will be a certain percentage of children who will fall into the child protection system, and we are accommodating that. As I have said, we have also expanded the mandatory reporting, so there are more mandatory reporters, so we are expecting more people to come into the system, but that is also why this year we have actually added extra money for the 44 further child protection officers to ensure that they have child protection officers to actually case manage them.

**Mr RIORDAN:** Okay. Are you saying it is predominantly population growth? You actually identified on page 217 'media attention'. There seem to be sort of lots of excuses, if you like, that would be there regardless of this year. I mean, all jurisdictions would have media attention focusing on this. Certainly many of the other states in Australia have population growth. Fourteen per cent seems a pretty significant increase in children having to be taken out of home, considering you have just sort of regaled to us—

**Mr DONNELLAN:** Well, that is funding. No, the growth is approximately about 8.6 per cent, I think, over the last three years. That is a funding increase because we want to get on top of it, so you have actually misinterpreted what we are doing there.

**Mr RIORDAN:** So what would be the delay in—

**Mr DONNELLAN:** No, let me answer the question. We have increased funding to ensure that things like early intervention and the like are undertaken to make sure we stop that growth actually happening.

**Mr RIORDAN:** Is it a performance measure for you to actually reduce the amount of children?

**Mr DONNELLAN:** Of course. The last thing you want to do this have more children in child protection. That is why we are doing the earlier intervention.

**Mr RIORDAN:** So what should this committee make of the fact that another state, New South Wales, actually has decreasing levels of—

**Mr DONNELLAN:** That is on different definitions, and it is not directly comparable.

**Mr RIORDAN:** So you cannot compare children out of home as children out of home.

**Mr DONNELLAN:** When you take them in, what criteria you do to actually take them in—the assessment services and the like—are undertaken in a different way. And if you look at our residential care, we have

actually halved that. We have gone from about 700 to about, I think, 400 over the last couple of years, which is the lowest in the country.

**Mr RIORDAN:** Sorry, what is the lowest in the country?

**Mr DONNELLAN:** If you look at the number of children per thousand in terms of the amount of home care, Victoria has the lowest rate in the country.

**Mr RIORDAN:** But it is still increasing significantly.

**Mr DONNELLAN:** Well, our population is increasing, as I have just indicated to you.

**Mr RIORDAN:** Right. Do you stand by that as a measure of success, the amount of children taken out of—

**Mr DONNELLAN:** Well, it is a measure which indicates children we need to provide funding for, and, you know, that is what it—

**Mr RIORDAN:** I mean, could this committee reasonably expect over this next term of government to see a decline in that figure rather than sort of what you could only describe as fairly significant increases?

**Mr DONNELLAN:** Well, I would certainly hope so, yes.

**Mr RIORDAN:** You would hope so?

**Mr DONNELLAN:** Yes. That is why we are putting the money in, to actually do the early interventions.

**Mr RIORDAN:** So we have got a department that hopes it can do it?

**The CHAIR:** You are asking about a future—

**Mr RIORDAN:** Are there strategies in place to reduce the number of children taken?

**Mr DONNELLAN:** Well, I think we have just been through that—the kinship care to ensure that we actually have better care models, supporting foster carers.

**Mr RIORDAN:** Speaking of foster carers, that moves on to my next question. Budget paper 3, page 69, in the middle of the page there is a welfare measure for rehoming. In light of the theme that we have had a bit in this session, Minister, are you aware that this is the only time the words ‘foster carer’ are mentioned in Labor’s budget? The words ‘foster carer’ are only mentioned once in the budget paper—on budget paper 3, page 69.

**Mr DONNELLAN:** Well, you know, in terms of the money we are putting into supporting foster carers, trialling new models in terms of providing support to foster carers and the like, whether it be the Carer KaFE and the like—in terms of our funding support it has increased massively.

**Mr RIORDAN:** Would it surprise you to realise, Minister, that nowhere in your department do you mention foster carers; that in fact in agriculture it talks about increased funding for foster caring animals and pets, but your department does not mention it at all.

**Mr DONNELLAN:** I think you are on the wrong spot, mate.

**Mr RIORDAN:** No, I am not on the wrong spot. I am quite clearly here. The only time—

**Mr DONNELLAN:** Just wait. Let us go through this:

Rehoming pets and supporting low-cost veterinary clinics.

**Mr RIORDAN:** That is right.

**Mr DONNELLAN:** What has that got to do with foster—

**Mr RIORDAN:** No, I am asking about your commitment to foster caring. It is not mentioned.

**Mr DONNELLAN:** That is not even in my portfolio.

**Mr RIORDAN:** Your Labor budget only talks of foster care for pets.

**Mr DONNELLAN:** I am here to talk about children, not pets.

**Mr RIORDAN:** Well, what message do you think that sends to the volunteers and many, many people in Victoria who are left to pick up the bill with foster caring when you cannot even mention them or show support in this budget for foster caring?

**Mr DONNELLAN:** That is for pets. I have got no idea what you are talking about. You are actually going off—

**Mr RIORDAN:** Minister, I am referring to the fact that your Labor budget, which talks about—

**Mr DONNELLAN:** So it is in the Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions, and you are asking me about a rehoming program for pets and supporting low-cost veterinary clinics.

**Mr RIORDAN:** Minister, can you refer anywhere in the budget to your department mentioning ‘foster carer’?

**Mr DONNELLAN:** Foster carers are mentioned throughout all our programs. What are you talking about?

**Mr RIORDAN:** Could you name one page in the budget?

**Ms PEAKE:** I might be able to assist. So there are measures that are in this year’s budget that are relevant directly to foster carers, and I am happy to take you—

**Mr RIORDAN:** Does it mention foster carers?

**Ms PEAKE:** That are directly relevant to foster carers. The \$41 million that is reflected on page 56 of the budget papers, BP3, ‘to meet demand for care of children’. That covers foster carers as well as other forms of care. The three programs that the minister mentioned that are innovative programs that we are trialling in the south. There is—

*Members interjecting.*

**Mr RIORDAN:** Sorry, Chair, I cannot hear.

**Ms PEAKE:** A specific reference to three programs that we are trialling in the south division. One of those is specifically around extra support for foster carers who are caring for children with very complex needs. The minister has referred to the—

**Mr RIORDAN:** So for that one example, what does it actually say for foster care?

**Ms PEAKE:** It talks about Treatment Foster Care Oregon. That is the program that we have been trialling in the south over the past 12 months, as I mentioned, for foster carers who are caring for children with very complex behaviours, so the budget papers refer to the three innovative new models of care that we are supporting.

**Mr RIORDAN:** So is there any new money in this budget for foster care?

**Ms PEAKE:** That treatment foster care program is a program that we have just started and so we have continued funding for that to support the continuation of OzChild, providing that innovative program. It is very early in the trial of that. It is an adolescent program that was initially started by Anglicare, and we have now extended it. Anglicare is continuing also, in this budget, to support an enhanced care model, which again is a therapeutic foster care model, and in addition there—

**Mr RIORDAN:** They are models. My point was how many times ‘foster’ gets mentioned. My next question is how many foster carers have been recruited in the last 12 months.

**Ms PEAKE:** So we have recruited—do I have that number?—375.

**Mr RIORDAN:** Sorry?

**Ms PEAKE:** Three hundred and seventy-five.

**Mr RIORDAN:** Three hundred and seventy-five new recruits, and how many foster carers have left the system?

**Ms PEAKE:** We absolutely acknowledge that there is a challenge in terms of the maintenance of carers, and the minister mentioned the program that we have introduced around the Carer KaFE, which is about providing specialised training.

**Mr RIORDAN:** So what was the level that had left?

**Ms PEAKE:** I think the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare has provided data for 17–18. That is the latest data that we have available to us, and that indicated, as I said, that there is a significant challenge. So there were 606 foster care households that exited.

**Mr RIORDAN:** Okay. So on an issue that is so critical to the care of the most vulnerable people in our state you have got two-year-old data, so you do not actually know how many people are leaving and you can only report 300 replacements on what you know was a 600 loss. We are talking a net loss of 300, and that is not even including the ones that left last year. Is that correct?

**Mr DONNELLAN:** Since we actually have a particular focus on kinship carers, because we believe that provides greater stability than anything else, you are seeing an enormous growth in kinship carers. Yes, there are issues in relation to foster carers in terms of recruiting them, and it takes a reasonably extensive period of time before people actually—they will check it out first, they will have a think about it and then they might actually—

**Mr RIORDAN:** Minister, you do not even know how many have left last year.

**Mr DONNELLAN:** What was that, sorry?

**Mr RIORDAN:** You cannot even tell us up until last year how many have left.

**Mr DONNELLAN:** Well, I can tell you that the allocation rate under your government was 81 per cent—

**Mr RIORDAN:** No, we are not talking about what happened six years ago. We are not talking about six years ago.

**Mr DONNELLAN:** We have 90 per cent, so in other words we are dealing with these things—

**Mr RIORDAN:** We are talking about you are making a stand that you are working in this area and in one of the most crucial—

**Mr DONNELLAN:** No. Let us make it very clear: you are drawing conclusions which are totally incorrect. If you look at the funding we provide for things like kinship carers and foster carers, we are putting an enormous amount of funding in.

**Mr RIORDAN:** Minister, we know with this government on funding you endlessly write out cheques, so it does not prove you gets things done. This is a case of some of the most valuable, important care that people provide in our community. You do not know how many people are exiting the system. The best you can give us is clearly going to be in the net. You can tell us how many enrolled last year, but not how many left but you have got the year before so we are clearly going backwards.

**Mr DONNELLAN:** We are trying to recruit more on an ongoing basis.

**Mr RIORDAN:** So the question is: what are you doing? What initiatives—and there do not seem to be any in this budget—are going to support those people that just donate so much of their life to this cause?

**Mr DONNELLAN:** We just actually went through that exercise with the foster carers.

**Ms PEAKE:** I can continue with the initiatives that are reflected in this year's budget if that would be helpful.

**Mr RIORDAN:** Well, you have rattled off initiatives that you can sort of loosely tie to that, but what we want to know is how we are going to measure the success of it?

**Mr DONNELLAN:** Well, that is what we are actually collecting—the evidence—through these trials presently.

**Mr RIORDAN:** Are we going to speed up the data?

**Mr DONNELLAN:** We would be very happy to come back to you in due course once we have finished collecting the evidence to see whether we size up these trials to ensure whether they are working or not, they are delivering better outcomes to the children or otherwise. That is why we are running these trials. I think there are approximately eight trials being run at the moment in terms of family and child therapy services to look at what works, what does not work and then we super-size it to actually provide it across the board. We do not pretend we have the answers to everything, but we are not sitting still. We are certainly putting more child protection officers in the system, and to actually—

**Mr RIORDAN:** No, Minister. Foster carers are not child protection officers.

**Mr DONNELLAN:** Yes, but they are all part of—

**Mr RIORDAN:** They are people who open their hearts and their homes to vulnerable children.

**Mr DONNELLAN:** I do not think you understand how the system works. There is a very limited understanding you obviously have. They are all part of the system.

**Mr RIORDAN:** Do not get me started on how the system works in regional Victoria, Minister, because we could be here all day if you want me to regale the difficulties of people in rural and regional Victoria because there are not the foster carers—

**The CHAIR:** We have a time line so we will not be, but I understand the point you are making.

**Mr RIORDAN:** So the point is you do not need to lecture us on that. We know about that. What we do know is that those people that open their homes and hearts and try to do the right thing and support vulnerable children in the community are not being supported by this government.

**Mr DONNELLAN:** Well, that is a conclusion you are drawing, which is totally incorrect.

**Ms PEAKE:** Mr Riordan, just if I could finish the other reference that is in the budget papers. On page 72 of budget paper 3 is the increase in supports: funding for care allowances, client expenses, Carer KaFE and flexible support for foster carers. I can take you through the growth in that. For 18–19, \$69.7 million grew to 19–20, \$71.4 million, and in 20–21, \$73.2 million. That was the other element that I wanted to mention because foster carers are very clear with us that they really value the training support that we have provided and that that care allowance is very important to them as well.

**Mr RIORDAN:** Okay. Changing topic in the last moments that we have, I refer to the KPI on budget paper 3, page 216, to reduce the abuse and neglect of children and young people. In quarter 3 of 2018–19 your department reported eight deaths and 178 cases of abuse against children in the child protection system. What is being done to reduce these incidents?

**Mr DONNELLAN:** Look, any deaths of any child are terrible for the community, full stop. In terms of the actual figure of the eight deaths, they are not necessarily always related to child abuse, for argument's sake. Most of the time they are related to congenital diseases and things like that. So I think—

**Mr RIORDAN:** Of those eight, they are mainly from health illnesses?

**Mr DONNELLAN:** I will get you some specific figures if you just bear with me for a second.

**Mr RIORDAN:** None of them are accident or misadventure or—

**Mr DONNELLAN:** What is that, sorry?

**Mr RIORDAN:** So of those eight deaths, you are saying—

**Mr DONNELLAN:** Most of them are congenital medical conditions. For example—

**Mr RIORDAN:** Right. So there are no accidents or misadventure.

**Mr DONNELLAN:** No, some of them are accidents. But spinal muscular atrophy, complications due to prematurity. Other causes of death include accidents and sudden infant death syndrome. A small number are non-accidental and drug-related. But the issue here is in terms of our reporting systems we have changed the way we report now to actually focus on the clients, so the impact on the client. In other words, previously we used to report incidents which could have included many other things. Now we report the impact on a client, which can include the deaths of a father driving a child who is known to child protection because the child was also in the car at the time of that particular accident.

**Mr RIORDAN:** Just to clarify that point, Minister, the incidents we are talking about, the eight deaths and 170 cases of abuse, are these incidents occurring under the watch of departmental-delivered services or are you saying that they are actually also happening—

**The CHAIR:** Minister, you will have to take that on notice unfortunately.

**Mr DONNELLAN:** Well, the department can be engaged within 12 months prior or is still engaged.

**The CHAIR:** Minister, you will have to take that on notice. Thank you very much for appearing before the committee today under the child protection portfolio. The committee will follow up any questions taken on notice in writing and responses will be required within 10 working days of the committee's request.

**Witnesses withdrew.**