

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the 2022-23 Budget Estimates

Melbourne—Monday, 23 May 2022

MEMBERS

Ms Lizzie Blandthorn—Chair

Mr Danny O'Brien—Deputy Chair

Mr Rodney Barton

Mr Sam Hibbins

Mr Gary Maas

Mrs Beverley McArthur

Mr James Newbury

Ms Pauline Richards

Mr Tim Richardson

Ms Nina Taylor

WITNESSES

Ms Ingrid Stitt MLC, Minister for Early Childhood,

Ms Jenny Atta PSM, Secretary,

Ms Kim Little, Deputy Secretary, Early Childhood Education,

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

Ms Jessica Trinder, Executive Director, Asset Management and Strategy, Victorian School Building Authority, Department of Education and Training.

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

I ask that mobile telephones please be turned to silent.

I begin by acknowledging the traditional Aboriginal owners of the land on which we are meeting. We pay our respects to them, their elders past, present and emerging as well as elders from other communities who may be with us today.

On behalf of the Parliament, the committee is conducting this Inquiry into the 2022–23 Budget Estimates. The committee's aim is to scrutinise public administration and finance to improve outcomes for the Victorian community.

I advise that all evidence taken by the committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. However, comments repeated outside this hearing may not be protected by this privilege.

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

We welcome Minister Stitt, in the first instance for the early childhood portfolio. We invite you to make a 5-minute presentation, which will be followed by questions from the committee.

Ms STITT: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, committee members, for the opportunity to appear before you today. I would like to start by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we are meeting and pay my respects to their elders past, present and emerging, and I would like to extend that acknowledgement to any Aboriginal people with us today.

Visual presentation.

Ms STITT: This year's budget invests \$217.2 million to ensure every child can benefit from the reforms of the past several years. It builds on the huge investment already made to three-year-old kinder across Victoria. We need to do more to remove barriers so that children from all backgrounds can benefit from two years of funded kindergarten. This budget does that by delivering significant targeted support for Victoria's most vulnerable and disadvantaged children. As you can see from this slide, we have delivered more than \$2.4 billion in new initiatives in the past four years, more than double the previous eight years combined.

This year children across the state have access to at least 5 hours of a funded three-year-old program. Victoria is the only state in Australia to give children access to two years of funded kindergarten before they start school. By 2029 all three- and four-year-old children will have access to 15 hours of funded kindergarten.

More than 2800 scholarships are being provided to aspiring teachers, with financial incentives to attract more teachers in hard-to-staff regional areas. Free TAFE is attracting new people to the sector, with more than 5800 people commencing a free TAFE early childhood course since 2020. To support play-based learning at home, the budget also continues the popular kinder kit.

This budget provides \$131.2 million to continue providing universal access to four-year-old kinder. This includes \$55.2 million to implement the new preschool reform agreement. We are providing almost \$64 million

to help services maintain staff-to-child ratios, and more than 100 rural kinders will share in \$4.3 million, benefiting 1000 children a year.

There is \$6.7 million to help kindergartens supplement the cost of employing more than 2400 experienced teachers each year, and there is \$1.4 million for kinder fee subsidies so more families can access free or low-cost kindergarten.

This budget includes almost \$21 million for support for vulnerable children and their families, and this includes funding to continue the early childhood Lookout and Access to Early Learning programs. We are also ensuring children known to child protection and those from families of refugee or asylum seeker backgrounds can access two years of free kindergarten.

Thanks to \$4 million of investment, we are working to ensure educational outcomes for culturally and linguistically diverse communities by boosting their participation in early childhood services, and there is \$5.5 million to continue the early childhood language program.

We are supporting more children with disability to go to kinder, with almost \$17 million in tailored programs. Thanks to almost \$12 million, we are helping kindergartens provide more inclusive facilities. And over \$5 million will ensure children not eligible for the national disability insurance scheme due to their residency status can access early childhood services.

Since 2019–20 we have invested more than \$300 million across 615 projects to help give early childhood services the modern and inclusive facilities they need.

We have also supported our services to be COVID safe with the investment of more than \$9 million in ventilation support grants across 1688 not-for-profit early childhood services.

I would like to thank all the amazing early childhood educators, teachers and support staff for their work, particularly over the last two years. They have provided quality care and education for Victoria's youngest and helped deliver our nation's biggest ever life-changing early childhood reform. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. Mr O'Brien.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Thank you, Chair. Good morning, Minister and team. Can I turn to budget paper 3, page 143, which has the performance measures for the portfolio and particularly the kindergarten participation rate in the year before school, which once again this year missed its target of 96 per cent. Why is that, Minister?

Ms STITT: Thank you, Mr O'Brien. In terms of four-year-old kindergarten participation and enrolments, there were 80 928 funded four-year-old kinder enrolments. That is higher than the 2020 enrolments and higher than the target of 80 000. I think that—

Mr D O'BRIEN: I am talking specifically about the participation rate.

Ms STITT: Yes. Well, the four-year-old kindergarten participation rate for 2021 increased to 92.9 per cent, and that is certainly up from the 2020 figure, which was 89.1 per cent. I actually think that is an outstanding result, particularly given the impacts that COVID had on the early childhood sector during that year. Furthermore, I think the actual participation rate may be slightly higher than that, given that the ABS population estimates that we used probably did not fully factor in the impacts of COVID-19 on the interstate and international migration. So I am certainly pleased to see an improvement in this year's figures, and of course we will be working very hard to make sure that we increase participation levels, particularly for those children that might be more vulnerable or coming from a disadvantaged background, because we know that access to universal kindergarten benefits those children the most.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Minister, it is great that it has gone up, but the 2014 budget papers showed that we had a participation rate of 98 per cent. That is even higher than your current target. When do we expect to see the participation rate back at 98 per cent?

Ms STITT: Well, I think, as I have already indicated, Mr O'Brien, we are always looking at ways that we can increase participation in kindergarten. We know that the most important thing for young children's developmental trajectories and for a very positive learning experience as they enter prep is to have universal

access to kindergarten, and what I would say is that three-year-old kindergarten is a massive demonstration of our government's commitment to—

Mr D O'BRIEN: I get all that, but—

Ms STITT: participation, because we will be able to really build the numbers of children coming through three-year-old as the foundation year and then four-year-old. I would expect to see the benefits of that as families right across the state become more familiar with just how important it is to have two years of kindergarten before they start school.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Can I ask perhaps the department: the published target rate is 96 per cent, how many children in terms of actual numbers who are eligible are not actually attending kindergarten?

Ms ATTA: I might ask the Deputy Secretary to go to that detail.

Ms LITTLE: Thank you very much for the question. It is not actually possible to specify with certainty how many children that is, and I can explain why—and we can take this question on notice further to get you whatever information is available. The reason for that is that when you are talking about a population of this size, which is around 80 000 children, the specificity of the ABS denominator will make a lot of difference to that number. So as the minister has flagged, particularly over the last two years there have been issues with the ABS denominator, and there are always issues at the margins because it is only an estimate of what the denominator is in a particular state at a particular time. I will say that over the last two years the denominator in particular has been less reliable than normal because of the patterns of migration changing and has not been fully updated, but we are happy to get you whatever information is available.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Okay. That would be good. In the absence of the Chair I am in charge, so stand back, everyone—Mr Newbury and Mrs McArthur. No. The call goes to Mr Maas.

Mr MAAS: Thank you, Deputy Chair. Thank you, Minister, and thank you, department officials, for your appearance this morning. Minister, if I could take you to the topic of supporting access to two years of kindergarten. Your presentation went to some broad brushstrokes I think in terms of support for that. I was hoping that you would be able to inform the committee what the government is actually doing to continue to support the rollout of three-year-old kinder.

Ms STITT: Thank you. I would be really happy to do that. As I mentioned in my presentation, three-year-old kinder is the largest early childhood investment in the state's history. We will be the only jurisdiction in Australia currently providing funded three-year-old kindergarten, and we are making this happen over the decade-long reform with an investment of \$5 billion. I am also really delighted that despite some of the challenges of COVID, this year saw the rollout of three-year-old kinder statewide to around 2700 services, so now we have right across the state young children enjoying the benefits of two years of kindergarten, which is wonderful.

As well as improving those education performance outcomes across the whole system, as I was discussing with Mr O'Brien, the quality of kindergarten programs also ensures much greater equity, and the key to that of course is participation and making sure that we are targeting those communities that may not have such a high awareness of the benefits of kindergarten. So there is a lot of really good work going on in that area by the department and by our kindergarten sector.

The initiative is also about creating jobs, so there will be more than 4000 additional kindergarten teachers over the life of the reform—these are high-quality jobs that I am really excited to see will be available right across the state—and an additional 2000 early childhood educators. Those are the anticipated numbers that we will need over the life of the reform. Can I take a second just to acknowledge the amazing work that they have done over the last two years in terms of those fabulous teachers and educators already in the sector. It has been quite challenging, but they have managed to keep our youngest Victorian learners really engaged throughout the course of the pandemic, so I am extremely grateful for that.

The \$5 billion reform over the next decade also of course includes a massive infrastructure program of \$1.68 billion over 10 years. Because of the size of this reform we have also taken the very deliberate approach of delivering the reform in stages, and we have worked really collaboratively with the sector in doing that. You will probably recall that we have rolled out in three stages, Mr Maas. We had initially six local government

areas in regional Victoria, and then the following year, in 2021, there were an additional 15 across regional Victoria. So it is really great that for regional Victorian kindergarten participants—our youngest learners—we are going to see the benefits of that far sooner and get a really good pattern at the statewide rollout this year of course across every other local government area.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Order! Sorry, Minister. The member's time has expired.

Ms STITT: Thank you.

Mr MAAS: Thank you.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: I call Mr Barton.

Mr BARTON: Thank you, Deputy Chair. Good morning, Minister and team.

Ms STITT: Good morning.

Mr BARTON: Minister, we know that some families might need a bit of extra support to send their kids to kinder, especially families who have a child with a disability or special needs that require additional attention and resourcing. What is the government doing to support these children and their families to make kinder an even playing field?

Ms STITT: Thank you, Mr Barton. I am really proud actually that this budget does address that issue. We know the significant impact two years of kinder have on outcomes for children, and of course the impact on learning and development that is driving our reforms means that universal three-year-old kindergarten across the state needs to benefit every Victorian child, including vulnerable children and including those with a disability. We know that if we can increase the numbers of children with disability who are participating in kindergarten, then that is going to have a profound positive impact on their learning outcomes. So I am proud that the budget this year include \$58.8 million over four years and \$4.3 million ongoing for the continuation of early intervention programs.

In regard to children with disability, this year's budget invests \$16.9 million over four years for the continuation of the kindergarten inclusion support program to meet that growing demand. This builds on the \$16.7 million in previous budgets, and so we will be seeing a delivery of a total of \$32.5 million for this program since 2017–18. The KIS program enables children with disability or complex medical needs to participate in funded kindergarten programs, and it builds the capacity of kindergarten services to provide inclusive learning and development environments that respond to the needs of children with disability or complex medical needs. It also provides staff training and of course minor building modifications so that our kindergartens can enable children of all abilities to attend and participate in kinder. There is also the capacity for services to provide additional staffing, and specialist expertise can also be brought in if that is required as part of this budget initiative.

Our government is also providing a range of other programs and services to support the participation of children with disability or additional needs. We have got the preschool field officer program, which provides consultancy services to kindergarten staff to support access and participation of children with additional needs. I think it is really important that we are supporting our teachers and educators through getting them the expert advice that they might need to be able to provide an individualised package for children with disability and their families; I think that it is incredibly important that we invest in that sort of initiative. The Early ABLES program also supports educators to observe and assess children's learning and development and develop those individual learning programs. I have been really thrilled to see how kindergartens are just going above and beyond to try to assist children and families dealing with disabilities. It has been really heartening.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Ms Richards.

Ms RICHARDS: Thank you, Minister, and thank you, officials. Again, like you did, it is an opportunity to thank the people who have been working so hard to educate our youngest and littlest legs, our littlest ones. I would like to explore workforce and follow on from the areas that Mr Maas was exploring. I refer you to budget paper 3, page 143. Minister, an adequate supply of well-qualified teachers and educators is obviously critical to delivering this important reform. What funding and programs are in place to attract and retain the workforce required?

Ms STITT: Thank you, Ms Richards. I think one of the many benefits of our three-year-old kindergarten reform is how we can support both the supply of new teachers and educators but also really support retaining the amazing people that already work in the sector. We know that that is really about careful, detailed planning to project where we need the workforce. We have been getting on with that job for the past 3½ years, and the department has been working very closely with all different parts of this quite diverse sector to make sure that we have the workforce in place that we need. So last year we worked intensively with stakeholders and peak bodies and developed a comprehensive early childhood workforce strategy, and we are now getting on with implementing that plan, including a \$209.9 million workforce package to attract and retain highly skilled staff.

So there is a range of different measures that government is putting in place both short term and longer term to support employers to attract and retain high-quality staff. As I mentioned in my presentation, we have awarded over 2800 scholarships to study early childhood teaching since October 2018, and we have invested an additional \$28.5 million to add the certificate III in early childhood education and care and also the diploma of early childhood education and care to our free TAFE list. It has been incredibly popular. I am really proud that we have been able to do that, because I think the other issue about this is that it is a highly feminised workforce. I would like to see more men in early childhood teacher and educator roles, but it is a highly feminised workforce. I am just so keen to see women right across our state get the opportunity to study in early childhood. I think it is a role that in the future I want to see the whole community value really highly as one of the most important jobs in our economy.

We are supporting quality student placements in early childhood education and care. As a result of a lot of feedback from the sector the program is promoting dual-qualified students and providing continued professional learning and research opportunities. An investment of \$32 million in the incredibly popular early childhood innovative initial teacher education program over three years will help build that pipeline of job-ready early childhood workers.

We have also got financial incentives worth between \$9000 and \$50 000 available to attract people in those harder-to-staff areas, including some parts of metropolitan Melbourne but also more regional and rural areas of Victoria, which traditionally have been quite hard to staff.

Ms RICHARDS: Thanks, Minister.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Mr Newbury.

Mr NEWBURY: Thank you. Minister, I note your previous announcement in relation to \$47 million towards Wyndham City Council, the collaboration in relation to that council and supporting that council area with money in the budget for Wyndham. In Port Phillip there are three childcare centres that are being forced to close. Is there any money in the budget for Port Phillip council?

Ms STITT: Thank you for that question, Mr Newbury. Of course I am aware of the issues that you refer to at Port Phillip and I have been in correspondence with the City of Port Phillip about those issues. I think that it is important to note that Port Phillip have not made a decision at this point in time, as I am advised, about the future of those three services, and I think it is incredibly important—

Mr NEWBURY: No, just for clarification, the council has made a decision. They did make a decision on that. But anyway, keep going.

Ms STITT: Well, the advice that I have to date, Mr Newbury, is that they have been consulting with the community about the future of those three services, which is incredibly important. They need to listen to what the community needs are in that area. I have been in correspondence with Port Phillip to make sure that they understand what infrastructure grants they might be eligible for for those three services. As you know, the government provides a range of different options for kindergartens, which are either linked to upgrading facilities or linked to capacity building—so whether there is a demand there for additional places. The VSBA has been working quite closely with Port Phillip regarding what their overall whole-of-local-government-area needs might be in relation to three- and four-year-old kindergarten—

Mr NEWBURY: We definitely have a shortage. I know in my end of the electorate, in the Elwood end, there is a demonstrated need. One of the difficulties I think for council was that—and I have seen the email from the department—they were advised that funding would not be available. I accept that there has been a

review of that initial advice—I accept that. So what I am wondering is: is there money in this budget? Like, there is \$47 million for Wyndham, is there money in this budget for Port Phillip?

Ms STITT: The money you are referring to in relation to Wyndham is the Building Blocks partnership agreement that has been struck with that local government area by the department and the VSBA, and that directly relates to what the forward infrastructure project needs are in that area. There are similar conversations going on with the Port Phillip council about what their future needs will be. We have reached agreement with Port Phillip on a KISP, which is the sort of mud map, if you like, or the planning map of what is required in the—

Mr NEWBURY: Did you say KISP with a P or ‘KIS’ as in—

Ms STITT: KISP.

Mr NEWBURY: Okay. Right.

Ms STITT: Yes. And the next step is for the VSBA to get into the much more detailed negotiations with the City of Port Phillip about what specific projects will be funded. I do not think it is accurate to say that we are not funding anything in Port Phillip. Those discussions are ongoing. They have been quite constructive and positive.

Mr NEWBURY: But you would definitely be aware of—

Ms STITT: I am going to ask Ms Trinder maybe to supplement my—

Mr NEWBURY: Can I just say: you would be aware that there is a petition that has been signed by over 3000 people, and I would be remiss and not representing the communities not to say they really want money in our local council area.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Newbury.

Mr NEWBURY: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Your time has expired. Ms Taylor.

Ms TAYLOR: Thank you, Minister and officials, for being here today. On the topic of infrastructure, can you outline the infrastructure investments that will deliver the new buildings and upgrades necessary to ensure all three- and four-year-old children can access two years of kindergarten?

Ms STITT: Thank you, Ms Taylor, and I know you have got an interest in early childhood kindergarten programs in the City of Port Phillip as well. Thank you for that question. It does give me an opportunity to lay out in broad terms the government’s initiatives in this area. Since 2015 we have invested \$880 million, which has contributed to the overall investment of \$1.6 billion over the decade in early childhood infrastructure. This funding is absolutely critical for supporting not only the rollout of three-year-old kinder but also meeting the ongoing demand for four-year-old kinder, so it serves that dual purpose. I am really pleased that the budget this year includes \$11.9 million to deliver another two rounds of Building Blocks inclusion programs, and that is to ensure that children of all abilities can access really high quality kindergarten facilities in their local area. It is in addition to the \$18 million in previous budgets and means we can deliver another two rounds of that Building Blocks inclusion grants scheme.

In addition to those inclusion grants I am happy to report that since the introduction of three-year-old kinder more than 159 major capacity-related projects have been funded under the government’s Building Blocks capacity stream, and this includes more than 42 in 2021–22. Since the introduction of the reform the capacity stream has funded 69 expansions, totalling \$47.862 million; 18 new early learning facilities, totalling \$21.97 million; 19 modular buildings, totalling \$31.73 million; 32 integrated children’s centres, totalling \$83 million; and 21 kinders on school site projects, one of my favourite policies, totalling more than \$70 million. So of the projects funded to date 52 were completed in time for the start of 2022 with the rollout of three-year-old kinder, 111 are currently in progress including 67 of them due to be completed by term 1 2023. This is a huge pipeline of infrastructure, and it is great to see just the scale of it and the way that that will transform the way our youngest learners can thrive. It really does make a huge difference for the teachers and the educators as well, because it means that they have got such flexibility in modern facilities to be able to plan their teaching.

It is estimated that funding allocated under the program so far will result in more than 3000 new three-year-old kindergarten places and 3900 four-year-old kinder places on top of nearly 10 000 three- and four-year-old kinder places funded from the previous program since 2015. So that is a real uplift in the number of places that this reform is delivering.

Ms TAYLOR: Thank you.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Order! Thank you, Minister. Mrs McArthur.

Mrs McARTHUR: Thank you, Deputy Chair. Just before I start, Ms Little, I think you might have promised that you would provide some extra information for the question Mr Newbury asked. I just want to confirm you have taken that on notice.

Ms LITTLE: Yes, absolutely. Whatever information is available I will be happy to provide.

Mr NEWBURY: Thank you.

Mrs McARTHUR: Thank you so much. Could I ask Ms Trinder, please: Victorian School Building Authority take a percentage off the top of every building project. What percentage is that?

Ms TRINDER: Thank you for the question. All of our projects are delivered fully funded within the allocation of the budget.

Mrs McARTHUR: Just your percentage that the Victorian School Building Authority take off every project.

Ms TRINDER: We do not take a percentage off. We fund project management within the costs.

Mrs McARTHUR: Yes, and what percentage is that?

Ms TRINDER: And that will vary depending on the nature of the project. So for example, the grants that are provided to local government and other service providers—there is no project management fee as part of the grant that is provided because we are not delivering those projects. We do deliver the kinders on school sites, and those projects are fully funded within the full budget of the kinder on school site. That is not given to anyone as such, it is funded within the kinder on school site budget.

Mrs McARTHUR: So you are denying that the VSBA take a percentage off projects?

Ms TRINDER: For our early childhood projects we do not take a percentage off a grant. We provide the grant, or we are delivering the project.

Mrs McARTHUR: Minister, you advocate that three-year-old kindergarten is free, but it is actually not completely free, is it, because local government have to provide in many cases a lot of the costs relating to the utilities and the buildings. So this cost shifting that occurs—and it especially affects small rural councils: how do you intend to address that? Are you going to ensure that all the costs that need to be picked up for free three-year-old kindergarten are going to be met by the government?

Ms STITT: Thank you, Mrs McArthur, for that question. There is a little bit in that which involves both infrastructure but also the way in which kindergarten fees operate. You would be aware that we have a partnership agreement with the commonwealth in relation to four-year-old kindergarten where we jointly fund four-year-old kinder. The Victorian government funds 10 hours per week.

Mrs McARTHUR: Yes. What about three-year-old kindergarten? The costs associated with the buildings and the utilities, the expenses incurred in providing the facility for the three-year-old kindergarten, which you said was free—ratepayers are picking up the bill, aren't they?

Ms STITT: Well, Mrs McArthur, the early childhood sector is quite diverse. There are a range of different providers within the sector delivering kindergarten programs. Kindergarten is not a building, it is a program, and it is delivered in long day care centres, which—

Mrs McARTHUR: So it is not completely free, Minister, is it?

Ms STITT: Well, I am trying to answer your question in a way that is logical, Mrs McArthur. We provide significant fee subsidies for kindergarten, both three- and four-year-old—

Mrs McARTHUR: I am talking about the costs—

Ms STITT: to the tune of about 65 per cent of fees.

Mrs McARTHUR: incurred by councils to maintain the facilities, which you told everybody were going to be free.

Ms STITT: Well, Mrs McArthur, I think that you are conflating a few different issues there. Local government do not run every kindergarten program. They might own some of the buildings that kindergartens and long day care services operate out of. They provide a range of different services in kinder—

Mrs McARTHUR: So they have to pick up the costs associated with providing the facilities—

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Order! The member's time has expired. Mr Richardson.

Mr RICHARDSON: Thank you, Deputy Chair. Thank you, Minister and department officials, for joining us today. Minister, I want to take you to the topic of women's participation in the workforce. It is amazing to think how in just a short period of time universal three-year-old kinder has been stood up and accessed across our state. I am wondering, for our benefit, if you can tell the committee how access to two years of funded kindergarten will benefit families, especially in relation to women and their participation in the economy.

Ms STITT: Thank you, Mr Richardson, for that question. Of course all the overseas evidence does show that providing access to two years of funded preschool programs, which is the real basis of the reform for the Victorian government, really does lay a foundation for the success of children, not just in kindergarten and prep but right through their school years. There are a number of different international studies that show that it can really be a game changer in relation to future prosperity, including literacy and numeracy. Of course at that very young age three-year-old kinder is really about giving them those foundations in emotional and social wellbeing, and it is really incredibly important for their trajectory once they do start school.

We know that children who start at the age of three gain really important academic, health and wellbeing, and emotional and social benefits, and that is especially the case for children that are most likely to be developmentally vulnerable—to get those two years of kindergarten. But high-quality early education delivered by amazing, well-supported teachers and educators is not just good for children and families, it is actually a really smart investment for our economy and for our community as a whole. For every dollar invested in early childhood education, there is a return of between \$2 and \$4 into the economy, so it also makes incredible sense from an economic perspective to pursue this reform. Until now kindergarten programs had only been funded universally for children at the age of four, so the Andrews Labor government recognises just how important investing in the early years is for a smart society and a smart economy.

We know that if families can access increased hours of kindergarten programs, it gives that family so many more options. As we scale up the available hours of the funded hours of three-year-old kinder from 5 hours to 15 hours over the life of the reform, we think that that will really give families, particularly women, far more options in terms of participating in the workforce, whether that be going back to work after a period off work with caring responsibilities or it might be that they are in a position to increase their hours of work in their chosen field. I can already see that now as I am going out to kindergartens. I talk to parents that are involved in the committees of management. I talk to teachers. It really is giving Victorian workers, particularly Victorian women, a lot more opportunities to participate in the workforce.

Mr RICHARDSON: Thank you.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. Mr Hibbins.

Mr HIBBINS: Thank you, Deputy Chair. And thank you, Minister and your team, for appearing this morning. Can I just get some figures from you, on notice if need be. I saw in your presentation you have allocated \$1.4 million to meet the demand for the kindergarten fee subsidy. Can I get some data for the last financial year in terms of just what the total cost of the fee subsidy program was, how many were offered, a

breakdown by area, and then also for how many it was a subsidy versus how many families actually got free kinder from that program.

Ms STITT: I might check with Ms Little whether we can provide that sort of detail.

Ms LITTLE: We can certainly provide information about the KFS budget. I can say here for the committee that approximately 25 per cent of families accessing kindergarten in Victoria are using the kindergarten fee subsidy, available in particular in sessional kindergarten services, and that is for families who are concession card holders, are Aboriginal, have multiple births and have certain kinds of refugee and asylum seeker visas. But we can certainly see, Mr Hibbins, what other information is available.

Mr HIBBINS: Terrific. Thank you. And can I get the same for the early start kindergarten program as well?

Ms LITTLE: Certainly. That is no problem at all.

Mr HIBBINS: Fantastic. Thank you. I want to ask now about community-based not-for-profit kinders and their declining share of overall kinder enrolments. Obviously that has been trending now for a very long time towards our for-profit services. Is that of concern to the government, and do you have any strategies to actually respond to that?

Ms STITT: As I was saying earlier to one of the committee members, I think Mrs McArthur, it is quite a diverse sector. We have got players—or providers, rather—right across the spectrum. There is for profit, mainly in the long day care settings; there is not for profit, both community-based run and EYMs; and there is local government run, which is essentially not for profit as well. So there is a real diversity of model, and that has been quite challenging—not insurmountable, but quite challenging—in terms of delivering a reform like three-year-old kinder to make sure that we are giving everybody equal opportunity to realise the benefits of two years of kindergarten. I think that also some of the pressures of modern life have meant it has been quite challenging for some of the parent committee run kindergartens to push through and do all of the regulatory work that is often required of providers, but our department works very closely with those providers to give them some additional support. I might ask Ms Little to supplement my comments. But we are very much aware of it, and that is why we have been so determined to make sure that those supports for the workforce in particular are in place but also for the sector as a whole. Ms Little?

Ms LITTLE: Certainly. Probably two things to say at a high level: one, Victoria, as you know, has a very long and proud history of not-for-profit sessional kindergarten, including in the community sector, and that is a far bigger part of the market than it is, say, in New South Wales and Queensland—sort of the obverse of the situation. We have got 70 per cent of children in four-year-old kindergarten, for example, attending their kindergarten in a sessional service, which is almost exclusively not for profit and community. And also that is where the infrastructure investment is going, as has been mentioned earlier.

Mr HIBBINS: Thank you.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: The member's time has expired. Thank you very much for appearing before the committee today. The committee will follow up on any questions taken on notice in writing, and responses are required within five working days of the committee's request.

The committee will now take a 5-minute break before beginning its consideration of the workplace safety portfolio, resuming at 9.20.

I declare this hearing adjourned.

Witnesses withdrew.