

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the 2025-26 Budget Estimates

Melbourne – Tuesday 10 June 2025

MEMBERS

Sarah Connolly – Chair

Nicholas McGowan – Deputy Chair

Jade Benham

Michael Galea

Mathew Hilakari

Lauren Kathage

Aiv Puglielli

Meng Heang Tak

Richard Welch

WITNESSES

Lizzie Blandthorn MLC, Minister for Children;

Peta McCammon, Secretary,

Danny O’Kelly, Deputy Secretary, Community Operations and Practice Leadership, and

Annette Lancy, Deputy Secretary, Children and Families, Department of Families, Fairness and Housing;

Jenny Atta, Secretary, Department of Health; and

Tony Bates, Acting Secretary,

Bronwen FitzGerald, Deputy Secretary, Early Childhood Education,

Andrea Del Monaco, Acting Deputy Secretary, Financial Policy and Information Services, and

Joanne Wandel, Chief Executive Officer, Victorian School Building Authority, Department of Education.

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, the lands of the Wurundjeri people. We pay our respects to them, their elders past, present and emerging as well as elders from other communities who may be here with us today.

On behalf of the Parliament, the committee is conducting this Inquiry into the 2025–26 Budget Estimates. The committee’s aim is to scrutinise administration and finance to improve outcomes for the Victorian community.

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

All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard and is broadcast live on the Parliament’s website. The broadcast includes automated captioning. Members and witnesses should be aware that all microphones are live during the hearings and anything you say may be picked up and captioned, even if you say it quietly.

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.

As Chair I expect that committee members will be respectful towards witnesses, the Victorian community joining the hearing via the live stream and other committee members.

I welcome the Minister for Children the Honourable Lizzie Blandthorn as well as officials from the Department of Education, Department of Health and DFFH. Minister, I am going to invite you to make an opening statement or presentation of no more than 10 minutes, after which time committee members will ask you questions.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Thank you very much, Chair, and thank you to the committee for the opportunity to present today in relation to the children’s portfolio. As you indicated, I am joined by the Secretary of education, the Secretary of health and the Secretary of the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing.

Can I also begin by acknowledging the traditional custodians of the land on which we are meeting today and pay my respect to elders, past and present. As I so often do when I am out in the community, I would also like to acknowledge that Aboriginal people were the first children, the first parents, the first carers, the first teachers and educators, the first nurturers and community workers on our lands and that we still have so much to learn from Aboriginal ways of knowing and doing when it comes to working with and caring for children and families. I really am very privileged to have the opportunity to witness the amazing work of so many of our Aboriginal children’s organisations.

Visual presentation.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Chair, children matter in Victoria, and the children's portfolio was established in 2023 to support equity of access and outcomes for Victorian children and their families. It brings together the universal services of education and maternal and child health with other family and children's supports. The portfolio supports every key stage from free primary health services in maternal and child health to high quality early education and services for children and families to support children and young people who might be at risk.

A focus for me over the last year has been listening to parents and carers through the series of 18 children's portfolio round tables as well as surveys that we have conducted. I have had the great privilege of meeting parents, carers, educators, teachers, nurses, community workers and many children and young people themselves across our great state to hear directly from them on their experiences of raising children or of growing up in Victoria. We have met in neighbourhood houses, schools, community facilities, playgroups and kinders in rural and regional Victoria and across Melbourne. We have met amongst CALD communities and the LGBTIQ+ communities and with Aboriginal Victorians. We were interested in the lived experience of raising children or of growing up in Victoria, and what we have heard is that Victoria is a great place to learn and grow, but there is always room to do more.

Maternal and child health is a free health service that every Victorian family can access for their children. It is there to help families in their journey and support every Victorian child to grow, to learn and to thrive. It is delivered locally by nurses and midwives in the community. We are continuing to invest in this vital service and support Victorian families. In the first few months the service provides health and wellbeing support and advice for parents following childbirth in the early stages of their journey, and it works in partnerships with mothers, fathers and carers to navigate early years.

There are 10 key ages and stages consults per child as well as enhanced services and supports, including maternal and child health services accessed via Aboriginal community controlled organisations. In the past year there have been almost 600,000 key ages and stages consultations as part of the universal MCH service; 15,600 families have accessed the enhanced MCH service, giving additional support to families that may need it; and 109,000 callers have reached out to the 24/7 maternal and child health line to get reassurance and advice.

Alongside our maternal and child health service, early parenting services centres are also providing specialist support for families. These services are provided at no cost to families and include residential stay programs, day stay programs and in-home supports. Through the 2025–26 state budget we have further invested in the Victorian early parenting centre network by providing an additional \$22.4 million over four years and \$5.9 million ongoing for the operation of six new early parenting centres now open in Ballarat, Bendigo, Casey, Geelong, Whittlesea and Wyndham. We are expanding the network from three to 13 early parenting centres across the state, and this will enable more parents, carers and families to access the services they need close to where they live.

Committee, our Best Start, Best Life reforms have brought about the biggest transformation of Victorian early childhood education in a generation. Evidence shows that children who attend two years of kindergarten have better development in language, prereading, early number concepts, independence, concentration and social skills when they start school. It is also linked to greater opportunities across children's schooling years and better life outcomes beyond school. And in 2024 our free kinder program is helping to ease cost-of-living pressures for families and remove financial barriers. Free kinder means better access to quality early childhood education, and we can see the positive impact of free kinder on participation rates, with strong take-up from both families and the sector. Last year 90.1 per cent of eligible children attended a three-year-old kindergarten program, up from 88.7 per cent the year before. That is 69,802 children enrolled in three-year-old kinder. For four-year-old kinder, 78,554 children were enrolled last year, and 96 per cent of eligible children attended a four-year-old kinder program. That is the highest rate since 2016.

This year's early childhood education investment also continues with the investment of \$2 billion to continue our Best Start, Best Life reforms, including three-year-old kindergarten, building on its success with Victorian families and the sector's strong support of the program, with more than 88 per cent of services offering the full 15-hour program in 2024. Around 143,000 children benefited from free kinder in 2024, and this year free kinder will save families up to \$2,627 per child across three-year-old, four-year-old and pre-prep kindergarten

programs, delivering on our commitment to providing more hours of kindergarten over the coming years, with pre-prep now available in six local government areas as the first step of its staged rollout across the state. And of course we are supporting the operation of the new early learning and childcare centres, with the first four of the 50 government owned and operated centres open this year.

This year's early childhood education investment also includes support to improve equity and access for children, and this includes \$15 million in Building Blocks improvement and inclusion grants and \$16.3 million to support equal participation in early education and care. We are providing \$5.3 million to increase kindergarten funding to Aboriginal community controlled organisations and \$3.1 million to deliver early childhood intervention services such as therapy support for children with disability or developmental delay who are not eligible for the NDIS. Funding of \$8.5 million is also provided to support the whole-of-Victorian-government implementation of the child information sharing scheme.

We turn to child protection and family services. Victoria has the second-lowest overall rate of children in care in the country, behind only the ACT at 6.3 per 1000 and below the national average of 7.7 per 1000. Child protection and family services work with families experiencing risk and vulnerability and provide children and young people with family services, child protection, care services and leaving care services. We have supported over 19,800 families with family services in 2023–24 and managed over 139,000 reports to child protection. I am always deeply impressed and proud of the work of our child protection workforce and the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing.

While we saw over 73 per cent of Aboriginal children placed with kin in 2023–24, we need to do more to address over-representation, as I have said many times before. Victoria is committed to the Aboriginal child placement principle, of which all elements are now legislated in Victoria.

In 2025–26 the overall funding for child protection and family services is \$2.2 billion, an increase of 51.3 per cent since 2019–20. The 2025–26 state budget provides almost \$272 million over four years for child protection and family services to continue to deliver early interventions and help for parents. Earlier intervention through family services helps families stay connected and strong. Family service interventions are a critical part of our service system, and we know they work. Families who engage with family services are 29 per cent less likely to proceed to a child protection substantiation.

Supporting our frontline child protection workers to keep our kids safe is extremely important, and it is why we are continually seeking to grow and support the child protection workforce. Since 2014 the funded child protection workforce capacity has increased 85.5 per cent, and over a three-year period from 2019–20 to 2023–24 the child protection workforce increased by nearly 500 workers. This represents a growth of 23 per cent over these years. In addition to investment, improvements have been made to the child protection operating model to increase frontline roles, streamline oversight and decision-making, and enhance supervision and support for staff. It is through our earlier intervention work in family services and supporting our child protection workforce that we can deliver the services we know will be effective.

The 2025–26 budget invests in Aboriginal-led service delivery, with nearly \$25 million over four years to enhance capacity for ACCOs to take care of children in statutory care.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. I will stop you there. We are going to go to Mr Welch.

Richard WELCH: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Minister. Minister, the Commission for Children and Young People completed 45 child death inquiries in 2023–24 of children who died within 12 months of child protection involvement. Their annual report states they continue to see 'persistent failures' and 'poor responses to children at risk' and on 56 occasions in the inquiry they reiterated their previous recommendations for improvements in child protection services responses. The first question is: why were CCYP's previous recommendations not implemented?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Thank you, Mr Welch, for your question. At the outset, can I first acknowledge that the death of any child of course is an absolute tragedy, and in relation to each and every child who has died I offer my sympathies to those who love and cared for them. When a child who was known to child protection in the previous 12 months dies, regardless of the circumstances, all services provided to them are independently reviewed by the Commission for Children and Young People. In 2023–24 there were 43 deaths of children known to child protection that were in scope for such a child death inquiry, and the findings and

recommendations that you refer to, and from such child death inquiries, can and do lead to improvements in practice, in process, in policies and in training for child protection practitioners and other relevant services, and that is a longstanding process. Being known to child protection includes all reports that have been made to child protection, and can include a child reported once –

Richard WELCH: But Minister, if I may, just in regard to their recommendations, why haven't they been implemented?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: As I am explaining to you, Mr Welch, when a child who is known to child protection dies and it satisfies those requirements for the CCYP to investigate, the findings and recommendations from child death inquiries can and do lead to improvements in the practice, in the training and in the delivery of services for children.

Richard WELCH: Yes, but why haven't all of their recommendations been implemented?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Are there specific recommendations that you want to go to, Mr Welch?

Richard WELCH: Well, can you tell me which ones have not been?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: You are talking about a number of inquiries. Are you talking about a specific –

Richard WELCH: No, I am talking about a specific inquiry.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Of the 45 completed inquiries, 34 inquiries made no new recommendations for the department, 11 inquiries made 13. Of those 13 recommendations, the department accepted eight; five recommendations were not accepted. Of the eight recommendations accepted by the department in 2023–24, three recommendations have been completed and the recommendations have been acquitted by the CCYP, four recommendations have been completed and the CCYP are considering the acquittal evidence. There is one recommendation in process. The CCYP's recommendations broadly focus, as I said earlier, in relation to things like workforce capability and capacity, policy program development and training and recent improvements, and indeed much of our constant re-evaluation of our programs and operations have embedded many of the learnings that we have made from this, including embedding the SAFER children framework, which provides the approach tools and practice guidance to support child protection practitioners undertaking risk assessments and regular professional development webinars on practice themes such as family violence, children and young people with complex medical needs, disability, working with infants, working with Aboriginal children and families, the continued implementation of the multi-agency risk assessment and management project –

Richard WELCH: Sorry, Minister, these are the ones that have been implemented, are they?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: These are all the sorts of things, absolutely, that have gone to –

Richard WELCH: Of the ones that they reiterated had not been completed, are they still yet to be adopted?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: As I said, three recommendations have been completed and acquitted by CCYP and four have been completed, and the CCYP are considering the acquittal evidence and there is one recommendation in progress. If you have got something more specific that you would like to go to, I can ask the Secretary to respond to that specifically. It is a little difficult on the limited information in your question.

Richard WELCH: Well, I guess their recommendations are on record, so if we could get a breakdown of which ones have been implemented and which ones have not, that would be a start.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Mr Welch, I am trying to be as helpful as possible. As I have said, I have outlined each of the 45 completed inquiries, the 34 inquiries where there were no new recommendations, the 11 inquiries where there were new recommendations and the sorts of things that we have worked with the CCYP on in terms of improving practice. There is also more that will be reported to CCYP over time, and our annual report is also regularly updated. So I am not exactly sure what else it is that you are seeking.

Richard WELCH: I will move on. Minister, the 45 children whose deaths were reviewed had been the subject, on average, of four reports to child protection, with one child subject to 24 reports. In 17 of the child death inquiries a child protection case was still open when the child or young person died. The statistics were

the same for the previous year. So how do you explain your inability to fix such profound and ongoing failures to protect vulnerable children?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: I reject the premise of your question, Mr Welch, because we have just outlined that we have indeed been more than responsive and worked very positively and cooperatively with the CCYP and indeed other agencies like, for example, the coroner, when the coroner makes findings, as well as across the department with other agencies across government, to ensure that there is constant re-evaluation.

Richard WELCH: There has not been an improvement, though, has there?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: I would again reject the premise of your question, Mr Welch. Our child protection workforce is dealing with more children than ever before and keeping more children safe than ever before. There are many children within our child protection system who are complex and who have complex needs, and our frontline workforce and our community service partners work extremely diligently with those children and families day in, day out to attempt to keep children safe. We have indeed been responsive, as I have just outlined, to the recommendations of the CCYP. As I said at the outset, the death of any child is an absolute tragedy, but I reject the politicisation of such cases that you are seeking to do here.

Richard WELCH: Of the commission's 47 recommendations made to improve the educational experiences of children and young people in out-of-home care through the 2023 report of the Let Us Learn inquiry, how many are still outstanding from those recommendations?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: So we are turning from child death inquiries to the *Let Us Learn* report – is that –

Richard WELCH: Yes.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Okay. If you just bear with me, I can go exactly to each of them. We work very cooperatively with the CCYP on a number of inquiries, but I have the updates here for you.

So, on *Let us Learn*: there was a recommendation of the CCYP –

Richard WELCH: If I could just have the number please, Minister.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Recommendation 4 is complete; recommendation 5 is in progress; recommendation 6 is in progress; recommendation 7, that one has not commenced; recommendation 8 is in progress; recommendation 10, in progress; recommendation 12, in progress; recommendation 17, in progress; recommendation 31, in progress; recommendation 32, the Department of Education has completed a review of the education needs analysis process and the findings from this review are being used to develop the future model with a pilot plan for term 3 2024.

Richard WELCH: But it would appear a number are not complete.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: I can read you out the status report on every single one if you would like.

Richard WELCH: No – for the sake of time. Thank you.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: They are all well and truly underway. As I was just going to, on that recommendation 32, which I called out specifically because it really is an important one –

Richard WELCH: There were also recommendations from the 2021 *Out of Sight: Systemic Inquiry into Children and Young People who are Absent or Missing from Residential Care*. How many of those recommendations are also outstanding?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: So recommendation 1: in addition to the department's 2024 update the remainder of this recommendation is being considered as part of work underway to consolidate and develop updated program requirements for therapeutic residential care. It is something I am more than happy to discuss with the committee. We have made significant investments in therapeutic care.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. We will go straight to Ms Kathage.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you, Chair, Minister and secretaries – I do not know what the plural noun is for three secretaries. Page 38 of the DPS has there a measure ‘Daily average number of children in care placements’. Minister, can you tell me how many current child protection practitioner vacancies we have?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Thank you, Ms Kathage, and yes, I appreciate the opportunity to discuss this again with the committee. It is a topic that we have gone to across a few PAECs now, including when I was the chair of PAEC. At the outset can I again, firstly, acknowledge our frontline PAEC staff, absolutely, but can I also most importantly, from my current role rather than as the PAEC chair, acknowledge the frontline child protection staff. It really is important that we do that and also that we turn our minds to vacancies in the context of the historical investment in the frontline child protection practitioner workforce, and as I said in my presentation, there has been an increase of over 80 per cent in its funded capacity since the Andrews–Allan governments. It should not be a surprise, given that there has been an absolute focus on filling these roles across that period of time and our vacancies are reducing. At my most recent update, being 14 May, there were 368 vacancies. It is important to note, one, that is a reduction from what I advised the committee last year, but it is also really important to compare these vacancy numbers in the context of increased frontline practitioners in the past 12 months, and this is a result of our implementation of the reform to the child protection operating model, which I referred to earlier and have spoken about in the chamber previously.

The new operating model introduces a number of workforce changes which are really aimed at strengthening the capacity, the supervision, the case allocation, the robust case planning and of course the risk assessment – to go to some of Mr Welch’s questions before. Importantly, this reform has resulted in an increase of over 100 FTE frontline practitioners, and therefore the total vacancy number in the program, as at my most recent update, is not comparable to last year. It really is a great achievement on the part of the operations division of the department that they have been able to implement this reform and ensure that it means that we have more frontline workers out there on the ground. It is also why I outlined in my presentation that this budget continues to provide \$14 million for continued support for our frontline child protection workforce. It is why we are funding things like the child protection international recruitment program, critical paralegal and administrative roles, specialist intervention unit resources, Aboriginal cultural support and awareness, kinship engagement coordinator roles and roles in the department’s interstate liaison information exchange teams. These auxiliary workforces are also really critical to ensuring that our child protection frontline workforce can meet its legislative obligations and keep families and the children safe and strong. In summary, our vacancies are reducing, and we are continuing to support this frontline workforce.

Lauren KATHAGE: You mentioned case allocation rates. Where are they at at the moment?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Thank you. This is also something that has always been important to this committee, and I do like the opportunity to be able to speak at length with the committee about it in a way that sometimes the dynamic of the chamber does not necessarily afford us. It is important to be really clear that there is always active oversight of each and every child within the child protection system. As I have previously advised the committee, all children involved with child protection are assigned to a team and overseen by a team manager. There are eyes on every child. The team manager is responsible for reviewing, monitoring and managing cases and for making those allocation decisions, and importantly, as you would expect, children at significant risk of harm are prioritised for allocation to a practitioner. This is a dynamic system, and there is always triaging and risk assessment happening.

Just recently when I visited the DFFH offices out in the east and spoke with some of our frontline workers, allocation rates were again a topic of conversation. It is always stressed to me when I have these discussions with our frontline workforce, as I have previously advised the committee, that cases that are awaiting allocation are very much monitored by our child protection teams. That monitoring happens through home visits, telephone contact with children and families and services that are providing the support to them, and there are children who are actively monitored by a team so as to ensure that their situation remains relatively stable. In the third quarter of 2024–25, to go specifically to your question, Ms Kathage, there was an average of 84.4 per cent of cases allocated to a practitioner, with 15.6 per cent of cases managed within a team. At the end of the third quarter of 2024–25 there were 3118 cases awaiting allocation. It is important to compare that to what we inherited. When we came to government the allocation rate was 81.5 per cent in December 2014, with 2691 cases awaiting allocation. Context is really important when we are discussing allocation rates, as it is not something unique to this government. But the system has grown; there are more children in the system than ever before, but our allocation rate is higher.

Lauren KATHAGE: Minister, with reference to that measure around children in care placements, how are you acting to prevent sexual exploitation of young people in care?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Thank you. In answering that question, can I first say that obviously sexual exploitation of any child, and certainly a child in care, is abhorrent. It is something that I, the Secretary, our community service organisation partners and Victoria Police are all collectively focused on working on, to prevent and disrupt child sexual exploitation. As I have advised the committee previously and do again now, we made an important investment in the last state budget of \$13.4 million specifically to better target sexual exploitation of children in care. This funding was for additional sexual exploitation practice leads, who are central to the department's efforts to identify and prevent sexual exploitation. Importantly, the extension of the program of these practice leads means that we have coverage right across the state; the introduction of sexual exploitation practice leads in both metro and rural after-hours service to identify and prevent sexual exploitation when it is happening outside of business hours, at night and over weekends; and additional capacity and capability to better enable detection and sharing of intelligence on sexual exploitation. This is all about having a really focused effort on preventing and disrupting the sexual exploitation of children.

It is always important to note whenever we discuss the role of sexual exploitation practice leads that they were established by this government in 2015. This role did not exist when the coalition was in government, and it is important to talk about the work of the SEPLs themselves. As I said, I recently visited the new DFFH Ringwood office, just across the road from Mr McGowan's office, and was able to discuss with both their child protection director and sexual exploitation practice leads from the outer east and the east the work that they are undertaking to prevent and disrupt child sexual exploitation. As I said earlier, these roles are statewide. We heard at the Ringwood office that –

Nick McGOWAN: Minister, I missed that. Sorry, I am a tea addict. I apologise for that.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: I just mentioned our new DFFH office opposite your office, Mr McGowan.

Nick McGOWAN: What were you saying?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: I visited recently the new DFFH office, which is just across the road from your office.

Nick McGOWAN: And I was not invited? When was this?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: No-one was invited. I was having a conversation with our sexual exploitation practice leads about the important work that they do in disrupting sexual exploitation of children in our care.

Lauren KATHAGE: Minister, on the same page there is a different measure around the number of under-12s in residential care. What is the current number there?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Thank you, Ms Kathage. The presence of children under 12 in residential care is something that concerns me, the Secretary and our Deputy Secretary, and it is certainly something that is a focus of our attention. Where there are options that are not suitable, a residential care placement can be used for a child under 12. As at 20 May 2025 there were 42 children under the age of 12 who were in residential care, and this represents 7.8 per cent of the overall children in residential care. Obviously our preference is always to have children cared for in home-based care, but there are decisions based on assessment of a child's individual circumstances and best interests that might at times necessitate a younger child being in residential care. As I have previously advised the committee, this can be due to complex needs or a sibling group being able to be kept together where there are some older siblings and some younger ones. The department actively monitors and has oversight of all care service placements, and this is through dedicated weekly meetings which are in place in each operational division in DFFH to oversight care service placements and the focus on overseeing children's individual care arrangements.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you, Minister.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Kathage. We are going to go to Ms Benham.

Jade BENHAM: Thank you. Evening, Minister, and thank you for the chocolates – appreciated. Following on from the \$13.4 million over four years for sexual exploitation that you were just talking about for children living in resi care, how much of that has been allocated for this year?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: The \$13.4 million was an allocation that provided for the ongoing appointment of the sexual exploitation practice leads which I was just talking about, and the actual breakdown is in the ‘Targeting child sexual exploitation’ budget line item. It is \$2.6 million in 2023–24, \$3.6 million in 2024–25, \$3.6 million in 2025–26 and \$3.6 million in 2026–27, so \$13.4 million over four years, which obviously goes to those programs that we were just speaking about, ensuring that we have the sexual exploitation practice happening right across the state, across all divisions and also in the after-hours service and that it is rural and regional, which I am sure is important to your community as well, Ms Benham, and making sure that we have that statewide, 24/7 coverage that ensures that we are working to disrupt the behaviour when it is actually happening.

Jade BENHAM: Thank you. Last year the CCYP revealed that in just one year 160 incidents were reported, involving 85 children in residential care being victims of child prostitution and sexual exploitation, including some as young as 11. The last quarterly incident reporting data – quarter 3, 1 Jan to 31 March 2025 – showed there were 291 incidents of abuse reported of children in out-of-home care, predominantly residential care. How many of those abuse incidents reported were for sexual abuse?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Improving the monitoring of child sexual exploitation is something that we have committed to. As I said, it was our government that set up the sexual exploitation practice leads, and it is our government that is also improving the monitoring so that we can better understand this abhorrent behaviour and make sure that we are working to disrupt it. The Victorian government is also working to better record and track incidents of child sexual exploitation.

Jade BENHAM: So do you know how many incidents?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Pardon?

Jade BENHAM: Do you know how many of those abusive incidents were sexual abuse?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: What I am explaining to you is that we are ensuring that we are putting in place a system – on 22 March 2025 we put in place an enhancement to the CRIS system, which was activated, designed to strengthen child sexual exploitation information and intelligence holdings within the system so that we can enhance the visibility of persons exploiting children, and also changes that have targeted the communication of the specific intelligence to Victoria Police. It has been developed in consultation with Victoria Police – the Secretary and I have had a number of conversations with Victoria Police about how these system changes, and system changes also at Victoria Police, will help in relation to how we can implement these responses, if you like, aligning with the recommendations of CCYP.

Jade BENHAM: Do we know the numbers? Do we know how many children and how many incidents were of sexual abuse, or is that something you can provide?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: You have just quoted the quarterly data, so the data that is there is publicly available, but what I am also speaking to is, like I think you are trying to get at, it is really important that we better understand –

Jade BENHAM: No, Minister, I am just trying to uncover how many children reported in these incidents that keep increasing – how many children were sexually abused in residential care?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: The data is publicly available, and you have just quoted to me from the data, but what I am also explaining to you is that we would like to also further understand more deeply some of what that data means in terms of how we can then work to disrupt this behaviour. So we have made changes to our system and we are working with Victoria Police to ensure that our systems work better together so that we can use these updates to complement the extensive work that has also been undertaken by people like the department’s office of professional practice and others to disrupt this kind of behaviour.

Jade BENHAM: So the actual numbers and the breakdown of those numbers are available publicly – they are in the public domain?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: You have just quoted from the publicly available data.

Jade BENHAM: Yes, but I am looking for specific numbers for those incidents and the breakdown of how many of those incidents were sexual abuse and how many children they involved.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: As I was just explaining to you, we are further enhancing our system – –

Jade BENHAM: So you do not know?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: I will ask the Secretary if she would like to explain it to you perhaps in a different way.

Jade BENHAM: I just need some numbers.

Peta McCAMMON: I would reference the CCYP annual report. We are required under the Act for all our CIMS reports – CIMS reports are where we get a notification of an incident, and then there is a requirement for providers to do an investigation. We provide all of those to the CCYP. They review those, and they publish in their annual report – I am just looking at it now – more detail, which includes sexual abuse, sexual exploitation, so that is in their annual report.

Jade BENHAM: Can you just give me the numbers?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: It is publicly available in the annual report.

Jade BENHAM: But I have not got the annual report in front of me.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Then you can – it is a publicly available document.

Jade BENHAM: The breakdown of sexual abuse is not publicly available.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: The CCYP annual report is an available document that you will be able to look at those numbers in.

Peta McCAMMON: I am looking at 2023–24 – sexual abuse was 342; sexual exploitation was 190.

Jade BENHAM: What about the first quarter of this year?

Peta McCAMMON: I do not have the detailed breakdown by quarter. What I do have is what was the annual figure from 2023–24.

Jade BENHAM: What we are actually after is the quarterly breakdown for this year. Is that available?

Peta McCAMMON: I do not have it here with me, but I am happy to take that away and see what we can provide.

Jade BENHAM: Great. Thank you very much. The CCYP's inquiry *Out of Sight*, tabled in 2021, examined what happens when children in residential care – the state's care – go missing. It found that many efforts previously in place to protect children from sexual exportation and abuse had ceased. Why did they cease, Minister?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: I will go back to my opening remarks in relation to our investments and the work that we have done in disrupting sexual exploitation amongst children in care and also those who are not in care. Our government, in 2015, put in place sexual exploitation practice leads. In the previous budget we extended those to 13 right across the state. The work that is happening now in terms of both coverage across the whole state, coverage outside business hours – on weekends, at night – and rural and regional coverage as well is far more extensive than anything that happened under any previous government. Our investments of \$13.4 million and our work to disrupt the sexual exploitation of children in residential care is constantly growing. I have met with each of the new sexual exploitation practice workers as a group and I have met with many of them

individually out there in the community and spoken with them about the capacity to do this work in disrupting sexual exploitation of children in care, as has the Secretary and as are our community service partners as well.

This work is extensive; it is difficult. I again commend our frontline workers who are working to disrupt this abhorrent behaviour. Children who live in our child protection system are complex, and many of them have complex needs, but the work of these frontline workers to ensure that we can keep them safe and away from predators like this is ever growing, as our presentation and my earlier remarks have gone to. And our work in terms of disrupting sexual exploitation has expanded significantly over the course of this government.

Jade BENHAM: I agree that frontline workers are under incredible pressure in this system and they are trying to do the best they can. But with the shockingly high numbers of sexual abuse of children and young people in residential care continuing, why is there not more funding in this budget to address this government failure and a broken system?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: There is funding in this budget across four years. There is an investment of \$13.4 million across four years.

Jade BENHAM: \$3.6 million a year.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: It is a complementary effort to the rest of the child protection system, which I will not have you run down in this context.

Jade BENHAM: I am asking why there is not more money.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Their work, the frontline work of each and every child protection worker and then the very particular work of the sexual exploitation practice leaders, their teams and the work that they do with Victoria Police to try to disrupt this abhorrent behaviour is not a single investment, it is a part of a complex system working to keep children safe. It is work that is ongoing. It is work that is supported. It is work that has grown, and it is work that far exceeds anything of any previous government.

Jade BENHAM: Do you not agree that \$3.6 million per year over the next three years is a drop in the ocean when it comes to protecting children?

The CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Benham. We are going to Mr Galea.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Chair. Good evening, Minister and secretaries. Minister, I would like to take you to 'Department Performance Statement' page 38 in relation to foster carers, specifically the performance standard on the daily average number of children in foster care placements. Minister, can you talk to me about any reforms that are being undertaken in this space?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Yes. Thank you, Mr Galea. At the outset I would like to thank foster carers for the important work that they do. Tonight hundreds of foster carers right across our state are taking home and looking after some of the most vulnerable children in our community. Foster carers give children and young people a home, a sense of security, a place to heal and a place to thrive when living with biological family is not feasible. I am very grateful to them for the crucial role that they do play. In acknowledging that, I would also like to just briefly mention the work that the DFFH have done to bring together a group of key stakeholders in relation to foster care so they can provide input to government on potential reforms in foster care. I am very grateful to this group for the input that they have provided and how they have shaped the reforms that government is progressing.

We are introducing reforms to foster care funding, and as a result we will establish up to 200 new therapeutic foster care placements. This will provide more carers, children and young people in foster care with access to enhanced therapeutic support. We have spent a lot of time already tonight and in the chamber talking about children in residential care, but it is absolutely a priority that where we can have children in home-based care, that that would be the best option. We are also establishing 20 carer support networks, supporting 120 to 200 foster carers. This will be piloted across Victoria from mid this year. This will mean that we will have therapeutic foster care, which includes a provision of additional training and support for foster carers across our state. The key differences from standard foster care placements would include access to a therapeutic specialist to support the carer and enhance the level of care provided to the child or young person with previous

experiences of trauma, which is many of the children in our care; increased financial supports for therapeutic foster carers; and additional training to support foster carers so that they are better equipped for looking after these children. The carer support network will also enable peer-based support, better assisting foster carers to support each other, respite care, social activities and informal advice between foster carers, which I know, hearing from them directly, is something that is really critical. It will also help maintain connections between children and young people and their other family members and assist in facilitating continuing relationships, which obviously ultimately help us with family reunification. This reform work in foster care and funding a more therapeutic approach to foster care really builds on work through the 2023–24 budget to enable all young people in residential care to have access to those therapeutic supports by 2025–26.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Minister. Another thing that gets frequently spoken about in the chamber, especially by you and me, is the self-determination of Aboriginal children and families. Minister, you have spoken many times about the importance of that, and I see that there is ongoing funding through the forward estimates in this budget: budget paper 3, page 3. Could you please talk to me to the initiative ‘Advancing self-determination for Aboriginal children and families’?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Yes, sure. Thank you. Firstly, I just want to affirm our government’s commitment to advancing self-determination in the support of Aboriginal children and families. We partner with and are funding Aboriginal community controlled organisations, as I spoke about in my opening remarks, to run Aboriginal-led services for Aboriginal children and families right across our state, and I am very proud that in the 2025–26 state budget there is a further \$24.9 million being invested over four years to advance self-determination. Again, this should not be seen in isolation. Just like the sexual exploitation investment, this is part of our broader investment, our biggest ever investment, in our child protection system. The aim of this funding will be to continue the critically important work our Aboriginal community controlled organisations are doing to ensure that Aboriginal children and families stay together and remain strong and remain connected to culture and their communities.

On budget day I had the great pleasure of visiting the Ballarat and District Aboriginal Co-operative to announce this \$24.9 million with the board of the Victorian Aboriginal Children and Young People’s Alliance and also the chair of BADAC, and Karen and her team at BADAC are working closely with government in the delivery of many of the programs that this funding will support. The \$24.9 million investment in this year’s state budget will expand our leading Community Protecting Boorais program, which is an Aboriginal-led child protection investigation program to support 522 Aboriginal children annually by 2026–27; uplift the Aboriginal Children in Aboriginal Care program, which is case management and care of children who have been placed on a Children’s Court protection order, with additional staff and workforce support and training; fund the work of the Aboriginal children and young people’s alliance, providing leadership, advocacy and support to all of the regional ACCOs that are within their network; and of course fund the really important Aboriginal Children’s Forum, which is the key Aboriginal-led governance forum. This year’s state budget builds on the record investment of \$140 million over four years from the 2023–24 budget, which again should not be seen in isolation. It is part of a whole system. All of these parts add up to our commitment to keeping children safer. In this year’s budget we have continued our commitment to investing in the delivery of Aboriginal-led services for Aboriginal children and families because we know that it works.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Minister. I would like to dive a little bit deeper into that. Just before I do, though, you were discussing with Ms Kathage before your discussions with the sexual exploitation practice leads. I am wondering if you can give the committee any more information or any more practical examples from those discussions of the sort of work that they are doing and how the funding in this and previous budgets is supporting that work.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Yes, sure – the work of the sexual exploitation practice leads. As I said, it is not money that should be seen in isolation. It is a four-year commitment specifically across that part of the program, but it is all interconnected with the work of the entire child protection system, which has had record investment in the last 10 years. When I was at Ringwood, at the DFFH office there, opposite Mr McGowan’s office, I was meeting with two of the sexual exploitation practice leads, and we had an hour-long discussion about some of the work that they do in terms of how they work with individual children to gain their trust. It is important to acknowledge that residential care units in particular are not a custodial setting and teenagers who live within them are living in a home like any other teenager is living in a home; they come and go from their home in the same way other teenagers do. But these are often complex children with complex needs who

sometimes have not had the opportunity to trust many adults, so the work that these SEPLs can do in working with individual children or organisations that work with children to build that trust and connect those children with the right services and supports for them is really critical.

The other thing that they spoke to me about is that having a network of 13 of them has really meant that instead of there just being a couple, as there were in the early days, they can work better with each other, better within their divisions and better with Victoria Police to really disrupt this abhorrent behaviour where really awful people are preying on really vulnerable children. The work that they are doing is really amazing and should be seen in that context and in the context of the work of the broader child protection system.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Minister. I appreciate that too. And I am jumping around a bit here, but back in the space of self-determination, you mentioned earlier the Aboriginal Children in Aboriginal Care program, and I am wondering if you could elaborate a little bit on that and how it is supporting First Nations families in Victoria to get better outcomes through the system.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Thank you, Mr Galea. As I have said, we know that there are too many First Nations children in our child protection system, and this is a focus for our government, it is a focus for me, it is a focus for the department and it is a focus for our community service partners and of course our ACCOs. We are increasing the supports we provide to First Nations children and families, and I regularly meet with ACCOs in my role as minister individually out there on the ground at things like the Aboriginal Children's Forum so that we can work better and ensure that ACCOs have the capacity. They know best how to care for their children in the way that is most culturally appropriate, and the Aboriginal Children in Aboriginal Care program gives authorised Aboriginal community controlled organisations the legal responsibility for Aboriginal children who have been placed on a Children's Court protection order. Those authorisations are under section 18 of the *Children, Youth and Families Act*, and it means that an ACCO provides case management and care to the child where child protection would have otherwise done so. This is providing for Aboriginal children and their families to be cared for by Aboriginal-led organisations. Practically, under this important program an authorised ACCO will actively work with the child's family, with their community and with their professionals to ensure their care.

Michael GALEA: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Galea. We are going to go to the Deputy Chair.

Nick McGOWAN: Thank you, Minister and secretaries. Minister, I will take you to the PAEC questionnaire. On page 20, and you might be able to help me here, it seems to show – and I say 'seems' – significant variance between the original funding allocations and the current expected funding allocations for the Best Start, Best Life kindergarten program. I note this funding has been revised down in 2024–25 by some \$50 million and by some \$90 million in 2025–26. Can you help me understand the variance?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Our Best Start, Best Life program – importantly, there is no change to the delivery of our free kinder commitments, our early learning commitments. There was a slight variation in terms of making sure that in the right years we had the right allocations for things such as ensuring that we had the right grants and infrastructure available for the appropriate number of children who would be starting and requiring three-year-old kinder or four-year-old kinder under the free kinder model and our enhanced pre-prep initiative. So there were some changes in the previous budget that went to that, but I think to get to what is potentially your real point, Mr McGowan, there are no significant changes to our investments in the Best Start, Best Life reforms.

Nick McGOWAN: No, my question was my real point.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: I will not assume your questions for you. I assumed that is where you were going.

Nick McGOWAN: I hate to disappoint you so early on, but that was my real point. I was just trying to understand it. Also, in the 2023–24 budget there appear to be significant funding amounts that have been drawn from contingency for continuation of this program, so some \$280 million in 2024–25 and some \$350 million in 2025–26. I am just trying to understand the chopping and changing in the funding for this program. It might be a similar answer that you have just addressed.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: It is a similar answer, as I just outlined. It is about how we meet the needs of providing for the rollout of our free three- and four-year-old kinder and our pre-prep initiatives in the right places at the right time, based on demand.

Nick McGOWAN: Is that to say the demand is in response to the policy setting that delayed the implementation of that program? Is that what we are really looking at? Is it now going to be over a longer horizon, essentially?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: No, not really. It is just about ensuring that where we obviously have a commitment for free three-year-old and free four-year-old kinder and our pre-prep expansions in local government areas by local government area, as we roll out our free kinder and our pre-prep in each of those places we have the right levels of funding available to us to meet those demands at each point in time.

Nick McGOWAN: Is there any change in the delivery timetable or timeframe?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: For free kinder and free prep?

Nick McGOWAN: Correct – free kinder for three- and four-year-olds.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: There was a slight change last year based on availability of workforce and in response to sector demand and sector inquiries about how we make certain areas ready by a particular time. But that was just about the rollout. The commitments remain the same.

Nick McGOWAN: Okay. Thank you. Page 33 of the department questionnaire, again, states \$2 billion in funding has been allocated to this program. Are you able to provide any line items that contribute to that funding amount?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: The \$2 billion obviously refers to over the four years, and it refers to the whole of the Best Start, Best Life reforms, if you like. It was obviously announced in 2022. It includes free kinder, so for three- and four-year-old; it includes pre-prep; it includes the continued rollout of three-year-old kindergarten, with programs increasing to 15 hours a week across the state by 2029; and it includes early learning and childcare centres, so the Victorian government is establishing the 50 owned and operated early learning centres – the first four, for example, of which opened this year and 14 next year. So it includes all of those elements.

Nick McGOWAN: Can you provide that line item with the funding amounts for those? Is that possible, line by line?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: I do not know that we could necessarily provide that by each line item, but I might ask the Secretary to supplement my answer.

Nick McGOWAN: Is it possible to disaggregate it?

Tony BATES: Yes, I think we could take that on notice too. As the minister said, it is a continuation of free kinder, Best Start, Best Life and the rollout of the early learning centres, so we probably can break some of that up in the out years.

Nick McGOWAN: Thank you. Whatever you can do would be most appreciated. Minister, can you also break down for us the capital funding for kindergartens by new builds and upgrades and/or extensions to the existing kinders if possible?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: I do not know that we could do it kinder by kinder, but obviously our Best Start, Best Life reforms include a massive infrastructure investment, which includes kinders on school sites, includes our early learning centres, includes our modular builds and includes things like our Building Blocks partnerships, which also then go to things like Building Blocks grants and our partnership with the non-government sector for kinders on school sites as well, so it is fairly extensive in that regard. Is there something in particular that you would like me to go to, Mr McGowan?

Nick McGOWAN: I think we are just trying to understand the capital funding for the kindergartens, with the new builds in particular but also with the upgrades/expansions of the existing ones, if that is possible.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: The 2023–24 state budget provided funding for 35 of the 50 committed early learning centres, four of which opened in 2025 and with 14 more to open in 2026, for which builders have been appointed and construction is underway on. A further six will be delivered in 2027, six in 2028 and five more from 2028. Of the 100 hundred kindergartens, with the majority on or near government school sites, this includes 20 in 2025, 25 –

Nick McGOWAN: Sorry to interrupt you, Minister. If you do not mind, can we get the breakdown in terms of the dollar values? Obviously that is what we are keen to understand.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: We can certainly take that away and have a look at what we could provide you, Mr McGowan, but some of it I am not sure that we can provide kinder by kinder. I mean, you are well and truly familiar with things like our kinders on school sites program. I know we have discussed them in relation to some of your own community's interests. Then we have things like the Building Blocks grants, which go to providing grants for either upgrading or modernising kindergartens. Look, we can see what we can provide you. Obviously things like the grant amounts are publicly available. Yes, we can take that away and have a look at it for you.

Nick McGOWAN: Yes, please, if you can. Obviously I am keen to see whether Great Ryrie Primary School has a new early learning and childcare centre, but you do not have to announce that today, Minister. I will just put that on notice perhaps.

Moving on to a separate issue here, on residential care units and homes, I recall in the last couple of years we have talked about the fully therapeutic model. How many of those residential care places remain to be at that standard? How many?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: By 1 July all residential care placements will be a therapeutic placement.

Nick McGOWAN: All of them?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: All of them.

Nick McGOWAN: Okay. What is your understanding? How often would a child or young person living in a residential care setting currently see their caseworker? Is there is an expectation from the department for that, or is that dependent on the child and their circumstances?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Maybe the Secretary would like to supplement my answer, but as we were talking earlier in relation to the allocation conversation, there is active oversight of all children in the system. The extent to which our allocation rates are higher than they have been – they are higher than what I reported to this committee last time – it is a dynamic system and we are constantly triaging to ensure that the risk assessment of each and every child is current and that each and every child is getting the supports that they need. I am not sure if the Secretary would like to supplement that.

Peta McCAMMON: Yes. Obviously children have different transition points in their lives as well. That is something else that is taken into account in terms of the intensity of the case management. Also, as the minister said, some of that case work is also undertaken by ACCOs as well and also community organisations, so it is not just child protection in relation to some of that case management.

Nick McGOWAN: Sure. Just an issue there. It could be for any one of the secretaries here – we have got a very high-powered panel here tonight it would appear. How many reports of peer-on-peer complaints or call them whatever you want – complaints, reports, et cetera – do you receive from the education system? In the state-based education system, peer on peer, whether it is sexual or physical abuse, how many reports did you receive last year and how many do you anticipate receiving this year going forward?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Sorry. just to clarify, your question is in relation to children in care?

Nick McGOWAN: Children in state schools.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Okay. That is probably more a matter for the education minister when you speak with him.

Nick McGOWAN: Yes, and we have the department secretary here. But it is only relevant because of course then it is a question of how that feeds into the child protection system and where that picks up and takes off. I am trying to understand what visibility, if any, of the child protection system has over those complaints.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Of peer-on-peer complaints within a school?

Nick McGOWAN: Claims of peer-on-peer assault or abuse, correct.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: I mean, whether or not a child is in child protection, that would be a matter for –

Nick McGOWAN: No, not a child protection child, just a child where there is a complaint within a school setting of a peer-on-peer sexual assault or abuse or assault; it could be any one of those categories.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: That is not really a matter that is within my responsibilities. That is a matter that you probably needed to discuss with the Minister for Education.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. We will go to Mr Tak.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you, Chair, Minister and officials. The Victorian early parenting centre service network is very much in budget paper 3 on page 49, table 1.14. Minister, could you explain why we are investing in the Victorian early parenting centre network?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Thank you. It is a great opportunity to be able to speak with you about the early parenting centre network. EPCs are an extension of our nation-leading maternal and child health program. Just last week I was with the Secretary – no, you were here; I was going to say we were at the disability ministers meeting, but no, the Deputy Secretary was with me instead because you were here.

Mathew HILAKARI: Having the time of her life.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: But we were having a discussion about how nation-leading Victoria's maternal and child health system is in and of itself. Our 10 visits that are part of our system per family I spoke to in our presentation. But our expansion of our early parenting system as a complement to that is something that is absolutely the envy of the nation. Our early parenting centre network is growing from three, which were obviously the much-valued early parenting centres of Tweddle in Footscray, QEC in Noble Park and what is now known as the O'Connell centre in Canterbury – when I was a child and went there it was the Grey Sisters, as I think it was known to many Irish Catholic families that went there. The essential EPC services delivered at these centres were stretched thin. There were only three of them across the state. They were not easily accessible for much of regional Victoria. But our recent investment in the EPC network in the 2019–20 state budget of \$123 million was underway to develop a comprehensive network of EPCs right across the state.

EPCs offer an opportunity to intervene in the early part of a family's journey, in those first four years, so they service families up until the youngest child is four to support the positive functioning of the family network. We know that the first 1000 days of a child's life really are vitally important in their growth, in their development and in their health and learning outcomes and set kids and families up for their lifelong journey. Delivery of this EPC network really is an important offering for families so that they get that extra support that they need to ensure that their babies get the very best start in life. The supports delivered at these essential centres – they are flexible, they are targeted. They really respond to the needs of the individual family and aim to enhance the parent and child relationship and also, importantly, to support parents to achieve the goals they set for themselves. We all know, particularly those of us who are parents, how stressful it can be when you have an unsettled baby, and this stress can extend into the functioning of the entire family, so importantly, these centres are also places that can address the needs of the whole family. Even the residential stay areas in these centres are set up in a way that the family can come and stay at them together.

The 2019–20 budget, as I said, allocated \$123 million to build seven new EPCs and refurbish two EPCs – Wyndham, Whittlesea, Casey, Ballarat, Geelong, Bendigo, Hastings, Footscray and Noble Park – and in the 2022–23 state budget there was \$25 million which was allocated to build the Shepparton EPC and \$15 million for the Northcote EPC. In the most recent 2025–26 state budget an extra \$5 million was allocated for the Northcote EPC in recognition of the additional costs in that neighbourhood, and \$3.9 million was allocated in

the 2023–24 budget to deliver the first Aboriginal-led EPC in Frankston as well. Currently we have the 10 EPCs operating right across the state, with three more well on the way.

No two families are the same, and the supports at these centres will be tailored for each and every family. They are amazing. They are beautiful. Ms Kathage and I visited some together. I think, Mr Galea, you came with us perhaps to one as well. And Mr Hilakari, I think we opened the Wyndham one together.

Nick McGOWAN: I feel a little left out, Minister.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Well, you are more than welcome, as always, Mr McGowan. They are beautiful places, and they are doing great work with local families.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you. Minister, if I recall correctly, I also joined you at the Noble Park opening.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Yes, you did. There you go; that is right.

Meng Heang TAK: Although it is in the Member for Mulgrave's –

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: We have done lots of things in Noble Park recently.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you, Minister. On the same budget paper, paper 3, on page 49, table 1.14, Minister, could you explain the type of support that is delivered through the early parenting centres and how the centres sort of complement the maternal and child health services?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Yes. Thank you. Obviously our universal maternal child health system includes our 10 key ages and stages visits; our enhanced services, which are longer, more targeted appointments for some families; the 24/7 maternal and child health line that many of us have probably had to call in the middle of the night; and the Aboriginal maternal and child health service as well. But no two families are the same, and these universal services can often be topped up by the services of an early parenting centre. Importantly also, and I think this is really critical, while you can be referred from other services to an early parenting centre, you can also have a self-referral, and that is also a really critical part of accessing these services. There can be day-care plans, which are day-stay services. They are centre-based day and group programs. They can be targeted at sleep and settling. They can be targeted at behaviour. They can be targeted at feeding. There are a range of services that are offered as day-stay services.

Then there are home-based overnight services as well, 24-hour, multi-day, centre-based intensive early parenting programs where the parent and/or carers and other family members – as I said, these centres are seeking to cater to the needs of the whole family – can stay in facilities designed specifically to support the delivery of services at the centre. They are also disability accessible, which I think is fantastic. Telehealth and web-based services are also available through these services. In fact every time I have visited one, I think there has been the consult room where you can see that there is active telehealth going on at the same time. But they are designed so that their supports can assist in the various areas of parenting across a range of issues, with a range of practitioners working from them, on sleep and settling, child behaviour, parent–child attachment and parent and child health and wellbeing.

As I said, a range of practitioners, maternal child health nurses, midwives, nurses, play therapists – the play therapists are amazing. Ms Richards and I had a great time playing with the – were you with us that day, Mr Galea, when we were pushing all the different coloured gels on the floor? The play therapists are also amazing. Psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers – people really can work together and work with the family to ensure that services are working to meet the needs of families and help them achieve their goals.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you, Minister. With reference to the same output initiative, could you please provide to the committee practical examples of how the support provided through the early parenting centres is helping Victorian parents and carers in their parenting journey and how parents and carers across the community can access this fantastic service?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: They are meeting families where they are at, which is really important. Families can turn up to them. Some have said to me how daunting it has been to first walk through the doors and ask for help but how instantly comforted they have felt by the care and supervision in the place and the way in which people instantly work together to help them both settle into the facility, whether they are there for a day or there

as a residential stay, and then also how they work with the families to work out what their goals are and how they are best going to achieve those goals together – how they can use the services to learn how to play together, how they can support behaviour, how they can sleep and use settling techniques. There was one family I met recently who had a baby who was struggling to sleep during the day, so the day program was tailored in a way that they would follow a normal daily routine. But in between, with the assistance of settling the baby for naps, the dad was sitting outside, the mum was in doing the settling and they were all working together to get the best outcome for them and their family there on the on that occasion. It was really interesting that after the nap time, the baby was really able to have a lovely play with the whole family together and, again, get the support in how to make the most of that valuable time.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I am going to go to Mr Puglielli.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you, Chair. Good evening. I am just going to begin with some questions on regulation in the early childhood sector – budget paper 3, page 15. Genius Childcare is now in the hands of administrators, having run seven centres in Melbourne. I understand the Altona one has already closed and the fate of the rest is still up in the air while the administrators try to sell them. Can I ask: given widespread complaints that staff are not getting paid and that there was legal action by the company’s creditors to the tune of millions of dollars, why were Genius and its owner Mr Darren Misquitta allowed to continue trading?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Thank you, Mr Puglielli. I happened to be watching Minister Carroll’s – the Deputy Premier’s – hearing, so I did note that you had a particular interest in this matter and I am sure the Secretary did too. At the outset I just want to make the point that child care, certainly when it comes to things like insolvency and employment matters, falls within the Commonwealth jurisdiction. Obviously we have a role in regulation at some level, but insolvency and employment matters are a Commonwealth jurisdiction. That said, I did want to acknowledge the announcement by Genius that there was an issue in relation to the payment of staff. Failure to pay wages or rent are not in and of themselves, though, offences under the national law, which as a regulator we have responsibility for, but I would say that our government is keen to continue to work with the Commonwealth and other states and territories to look at the adequacy of national law and regulations when it comes to that. Just last week I had a conversation about that with the new federal minister, and I also pointed out to her that it was a matter that a number of us want to have a conversation with her about at our upcoming education ministers meeting.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. Can I ask: on what basis was the owner of Genius approved as a fit and proper person to be running a childcare business?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: I might ask the Secretary.

Tony BATES: Thanks, Mr Puglielli. It is a complex regulatory system. As you might understand, the proprietors need to be approved as a provider first of all. The national law is quite specific in the grounds which we need to look at, and as the minister said, we do not have powers to do broad-ranging financial searches. The person did meet the requirements at the time of getting the initial approval as a provider. That then cascades down into having to have service level approvals, and the service level approvals are very much focused on the physical fabric of the building – do they have all the operating procedures and processes? So when people make the application, we apply the criteria that are set out under the national law, and he did pass those criteria.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay.

Tony BATES: I will say it is a very complex situation where there are company structures operating across multiple states. I think you might be aware that the brand name was Genius, but it was actually two companies in Victoria. And I can say the Victorian regulator is working closely with interstate regulators to try and get a unified picture across the country.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. That is good to hear. Can I ask broadly, when looking at enforcement action the department’s webpage listing for enforcement action does not appear to have been updated since the end of 2024. Is it the case that there has been no enforcement action in the past five months?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: As is appropriate, QARD updates enforcement action quarterly, but they have to wait until all internal or external review periods have elapsed to be able to do that. My advice is that enforcement actions for first quarter 2025 are expected to be published in late June 2025. ASIC publishes

enforcement actions every six months, and as at 4th of the 6th 2025 their enforcement actions were last updated in 2024 also.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. Thank you. My understanding is that the actions published by the department do not actually say what happened at each childcare centre where the action has been taken. Instead, it lists the sections of national law not complied with. Can I ask why that broad information is not published even though I understand the national law allows you to do so?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Secretary, if you would like to –

Tony BATES: Thanks, Minister. Mr Puglielli, if you look at what we publish, we go through the various either sections of the Act or the various regulations. If you read them, you can get a fairly good idea of what is going on. Some of them will talk about, you know, glass safety or will talk about food standards. By reading those explanations we do have in the publication, you can get a pretty good understanding of the issues of concern. And sometimes when you look you will see there will only be one or two issues, and concerningly, some services will have seven, eight or 10 issues that are listed there. I will just say we do have to work within the national law. So we can name the service and we can name the registered provider, but there are strict obligations about not revealing information that could lead to the identification of children or other staff unless they are subject to specific disciplinary procedures. I think we have got the balance there within the national law. Again, we do not list the exact detail of every incident at every service. But by reading that descriptions column, you can get a pretty clear idea.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. Thank you for that assessment. On another matter but staying on regulations, so the same budget page, there have been some pretty shocking allegations of serious misconduct and systemic issues across multiple Affinity Education Group centres. That is in New South Wales and ACT. This group, I understand, also operates childcare centres in Victoria. Minister, have you received advice on the compliance of Affinity centres in Victoria?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Just bear with me for a moment.

Tony BATES: In brief 14.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Yes. Thank you, Secretary. Affinity Education operates 52 services across Victoria, to your point. Where there are current investigations, it would be inappropriate for me to comment on those. Victoria's regulatory authority and other regulatory authorities are actively monitoring, though, Affinity Education services and investigating incidents in services and will take action where that is required. But as I said, I cannot comment on any ongoing investigations. However, if we have concerns that issues have occurred, such as they have been seen to occur in other states, then investigation action would obviously follow that. The allegations that you are referring to have not been, so far, ones that have required action in our jurisdiction, but where there are ongoing investigations it is inappropriate for me to comment on those.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. Just to follow that up, is the department aware of any risks or breaches that have been reported regarding these centres in Victoria?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Secretary, I do not know if you want to supplement anything I have already said.

Tony BATES: I do not have details on Affinity at hand, Minister, but I will just say we do have a risk-based regulatory model, so we are constantly scanning. When we get reports of under-wage payment, again we do not have power under national law to intervene there, but we do use that as one of the factors we take into account when deciding which services to visit and inspect. But I do not have any particular details about Affinity at the moment. The thing I will say is we do have a higher rate of compliance than other states. We do over 4700 visits to services each year. If you look at the Victorian numbers, we have got 96 per cent of our services at or above the national minimum standards, and that is compared to a 91 per cent national figure, and that 91 per cent includes our 96 per cent. So if you back us out, the rest of the country is sitting at about 88, 89 per cent. So we feel, with some of the supports we have in place where we provide a lot of training materials out to the sector as well – we regulate because we want to make sure that all children are safe and being appropriately cared for.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. Staying on the same budget page but not on regulation anymore, looking at early childhood sector supports and regulation funding for 2025–26, \$15.4 million has been allocated in this year's budget, to my understanding. Can I get a clarification of what proportion of that funding is specifically allocated to strengthening participation of children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds in early childhood education?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: One of the critical things in this budget is our investment in equal participation in early education. The Victorian government has invested \$16.3 million over four years, \$2.4 million ongoing, to provide early intervention programs supporting children who are at risk of poor educational outcomes, which obviously can include those who are of a non-English speaking background. There is ongoing funding for the access to early learning program at six sites. There are flexible support packages for children with complex trauma, which are often also children of non-English speaking backgrounds, be they children who have come here with trauma experiences and who might present with learning and developmental needs that impact their inclusion and their full participation in kinder. We have also got the four Lookout streamlining access officers to build system capacity, which is more about supporting children in the child protection system, and we have also got the package at the Children's hospital.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. We will go to Mr Hilakari.

Mathew HILAKARI: Thank you, Minister. Thank you, secretaries, for your attendance this evening. Minister, I might take you to your budget paper 3, page 38, the 'Strong Families, Safe Children: connecting, strengthening and restoring families' line item, which has a substantial amount of money dedicated to it in the coming two years. I am hoping you can talk to what these programs are and what we are hoping some of the outcomes will be.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Yes, thank you. I might, Mr Hilakari, if you do not mind, also just correct something I said earlier – and this is a mistake I make all the time; I undersell us, not upsell us – which goes to our sexual exploitation conversation earlier: it is 19 workers across the state, not 13. For some reason, as I just said to the Secretary, I always say 13 when I know that it is 19.

Mathew HILAKARI: It is important to correct it now, so thank you.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Just for the record.

Mathew HILAKARI: Thank you for doing so.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: But to your point about strong families and safe children, these components really underpin the family services platform, and together with our more than tripled investment in family services from \$120 million per annum in 2012–13 – so before we came to government – to over \$446.1 million per annum in 2025–26, again another example of how, as a system, as a whole, our investment in keeping families connected, making them stronger and restoring them across our family services system, but also then into our child protection system, there is more investment in doing this than there ever has been previously. This investment of \$446.1 million per annum in 2025–26 means that thousands of families can receive the support that they need when they need it, and our investment shows our commitment to supporting families with early supports, because we know that if families get early supports, be they through our universal systems of early education or maternal and child health and our early parenting centres or whether they are extra supports through our family services, the earlier families get the assistance and support they need, then the stronger and more connected they will remain.

In 2025–26 the state budget provides \$167.4 million over two years to continue earlier interventions to keep over 5900 families together. There are three components, as I said: connecting, strengthening, restoring. The family services platform is organised on that basis, and with each of these streams the aim is to support families before challenges escalate and to ensure that we divert families from the more statutory end of the system. It might be helpful to further explain what sits under each of these. Connecting Families is, if you like, the lowest level of support and connects with families through partnerships with the universal services like maternal child health, schools and early education. It is designed for families that have emerging life stressors and parenting difficulties. Services that sit under this stream work with children and families to build networks of community

support, build cultural connection, and promote health and child development and of course their overall family wellbeing. It includes the Early Help Family Service, which has been shown to build parenting skills and confidence and increase help-seeking behaviours. Strengthening Families is the mid-tier level of support. It provides support for families that might have cumulative or escalating needs. It can be provided in home or in group coaching to secure children's safety within the home and hopefully ensure that children do not go further into the statutory end of the system. It builds parental knowledge and confidence, and helps families implement strategies that might assist them in their own dynamic at home, building positive interactions and positive relationships. Integrated Family Services sits under this stream. Then, finally, Restoring Families is the most intensive area of support. It is designed for families who have significant, enduring needs, and services under this stream provide comprehensive, interdisciplinary, in-home child and family support. It is very tailored. It is targeted. It supports families who might need recovery or healing from their previous situations. The Restoring Families stream provides services such as rapid engagement and diversion, and family preservation and reunification services as well.

Mathew HILAKARI: Thank you, Minister. That was a very comprehensive summary, and 5900 families getting that support is really important. You mentioned just then 'rapid engagement and diversion'. How does that support children and families?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Rapid engagement and diversion really is about making sure that we get to families and get them the support that they need as soon as they need it. It is that evidence-based assistance to really meet their challenges and work out the way forward. It is about making sure that we can get families what they need in terms of behavioural supports, in terms of the partnerships within the household – those extra tools and equipment that really help with family functioning – and really seek to ensure that children do not, again, go deeper into the system.

Mathew HILAKARI: Similarly, on Integrated Family Services: what sort of impact is this program having for families?

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: Families do not work in silos –

Mathew HILAKARI: I am shocked to hear that.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: and our services should not work in silos, so the more integrated our supports are the better. It is another important program which speaks to those who might be experiencing really challenging life circumstances. This could be things like financial pressures. It could be mental health challenges or difficult family relationships. It aims to prevent families from needing more intensive family services or, again, from progressing into the child protection system. All of our family services supports really are designed, as I said at the outset, to connect and strengthen families to ensure that those supports and services that exist deeper into the system is not where they end up. They are there if they need them, but we hope that we can keep families as well supported as possible in the earlier stages and divert them from the pointier end of the system. They can include things like counselling and mediation; coaching and role modelling; support to link in with universal and secondary services; strategies to build parental capacity, such as how to manage emotions and challenging behaviours; household management strategies – that is often a stressor for families, and the more we can help families manage at home overall then the happier the household will be; advice on how to build positive relationships; and, really critically, support to cultural groups as well, be they Aboriginal or otherwise.

Mathew HILAKARI: Thank you, Minister. I might take us to another area of policy around early childhood. I will take us to page 15 of BP3, 'Supporting equal participation in early education and care'. I am taking it that this is part of our wonderful early kinder programs that have been rolled out, which we are all so excited about. I am hoping you could talk about equitable access to early childhood education, particularly for vulnerable children, because it is a mainstream program, but we want to make sure everyone is participating.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: I kind of jumped here when Mr Puglielli was asking questions earlier, because it is exciting, the work that is happening in this space, and it really is indicative of the Premier's foresight in bringing all of these things together in one portfolio. We have a fantastic maternal child health system – as I said, nation-leading – and our Best Start, Best Life reforms are again nation-leading. The more we can bring those universal services together and where necessary top families up for equal participation with other supports and programs through many of the sorts of programs that we have in the Department of Families,

Fairness and Housing, then – as I said, families do not work in silos. We can bring all of those things together and really give people and families and, most importantly, children the best opportunity in those early years.

But this budget specifically supports four vitally important programs, and there is the \$16.3 million for this equal participation program. As I said to Mr Puglielli, there is the access to early learning, the flexible support packages, the specialist Lookout staff and the kinder at the Royal Children's Hospital to ensure that kinder children who are in hospital do not have their early years education disrupted as would have once been the case. It really is exciting that we have this opportunity to ensure that whatever vulnerabilities are facing a family – be they unwell and in the children's hospital, be they in our child protection system or be they needing that extra bit of support because they have come from an experience of trauma – we have those extra services there, funded in this budget, that are about making sure that children get equal opportunity in their early education.

Mathew HILAKARI: Minister, I might take us to the department objectives and outputs and the number of children funded to participate the year before school and the two years prior to school. It is important to go through the data as well. I might take that offline, Minister.

Lizzie BLANDTHORN: No worries. Happy to provide it.

The CHAIR: Apologies, Mr Hilakari. Minister and officials, thank you very much for appearing before the committee this afternoon. 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. Some of the content that has been discussed here today some people might find particularly difficult. I do want to say that Bravehearts offers support for adult survivors of child sexual abuse, and the information and support line can be reached on 1800 272 831. If your child or another child is in a situation that is life-threatening, please call Victoria Police. To report concerns about the immediate safety of a child after hours, call the after-hours child protection emergency service on 131 278. The committee is going to take a break before beginning its consideration of the portfolio of disability at 7:10 pm. I declare this hearing adjourned.

Witnesses withdrew.