

CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into budget estimates 2005–06

Melbourne — 2 June 2005

Members

Mr W. R. Baxter

Ms C. M. Campbell

Mr R. W. Clark

Mr B. Forwood

Ms D. L. Green

Mr J. Merlino

Mr G. K. Rich-Phillips

Ms G. D. Romanes

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Deputy Chair: Mr B. Forwood

Staff

Executive Officer: Ms M. Cornwell

Witnesses

Ms S. Garbutt, Minister for Children;

Ms P. Faulkner, secretary;

Ms G. Callister, executive director, Office for Children; and

Mr L. Wallace, executive director, financial and corporate services, Department of Human Services.

The CHAIR — Minister, I would be keen for you to keep your coverage of the overheads to a maximum of 5 minutes; I will give you a warning after 4 minutes. For those who have just joined us, could you please make sure your mobile phones are turned off and pagers put to silent.

Ms GARBUTT — Can I just clarify a couple of things? Firstly, are there going to be any more disability questions, or should I —

Mr FORWOOD — Yes, I have some.

Ms GARBUTT — You have some more. Okay, fine. We want to clarify the issue about the Baird report. It was released to the *Age* and *Herald Sun*. I am bringing you a copy of the press release that went out with it. It was also released to the previous shadow minister, so perhaps you need to talk to Lorraine Elliott. It has been released and has been accepted and fully implemented.

We also undertook to get back details about what has been implemented following the recent case, and Gill has that information.

Ms CALLISTER — Thank you, Minister. In relation to the additional staff the minister referred to, four additional staff have gone onto the evening staff at Malmsbury, which is the more pressured shift during peak time, and those staff have started already. The funds for an additional senior forensic psychologist at the centre are available now, and that is being advertised. In relation to the strongest supervision that the minister talked about, the access to unsupervised areas, such as being allowed to return to their bedrooms for short periods unsupervised, is now no longer possible. There is a certain amount of jewellery that is allowed to be worn, and there is a restriction on the use of CD players and their volume. In addition to that, which was already in place, there are half-hourly head counts.

Overheads shown.

Ms GARBUTT — There is a great deal of new investment in children and families to support the government's stronger focus on children. There is \$141 million over four years in this budget. The initiatives that fall within my portfolio for children are a very significant contribution to the social policy statement, *A Fairer Victoria*. In the budget context, the background here is those four reports and the decisions to increase funding in the budget. *A Fairer Victoria* outlined 14 strategies, and the first 3 of them relate to this particular portfolio. They make up 18 per cent of the total spending on the package, so are a significant focus of *A Fairer Victoria*. Some of the new investment that makes up the \$141 million includes the Aboriginal initiatives, which are also very significant.

The investments in Putting Children First are listed there. As you know, the government has been reinvesting in kindergarten services and maternal and child health since 1999. They are the universal services. This package provides the next steps in the ongoing rebuilding of our universal base. It reflects some of the recommendations of the Premier's Children's Advisory Committee and implements some of them. Early learning in kindergarten and in child care — these were particular recommendations from the Premier's Children's Advisory Committee. We aim to reverse the recent decline in the number of child-care centres that offer kindergarten programs within them, and we will go into that much more.

The next one is earlier support for families of children with disability. This increases the early intervention places and builds on the \$6 million that we implemented as a result of the election commitment. So we are lifting the number of places there. There is another around \$8 million for early childhood flexible support packages, and we mentioned them before. A major focus is on connecting families with local services. This is a series of initiatives focused, I suppose, on vulnerable families, particularly for those years between maternal and child health and kindergarten, where there is often a gap. We want to make sure that families have support to care for children in those key years. There are also particular programs there to support Aboriginal mothers. We know that Aboriginal children do not attend the universal services in anything like the proportions others attending do. There is another emphasis on protecting children at risk of harm, extending the family support innovation projects and establishing an Aboriginal family restoration program as well, and there is significant funding there.

The next is promoting child safety. This of course links with the office of the Child Safety Commissioner and our appointment there, with the particular focus on making sure that children are safe. We have allocated funds for that

as well. One of the most exciting things that we are doing is developing a statewide plan for children through the Office for Children, and there is \$7 million of funding to allow that.

There is extra investment as well in the juvenile justice system in terms of the age change, which members will be familiar with through the legislation in Parliament. The major addition of \$35 million for family violence programs is across government, and a considerable portion of it, \$14.5 million, is within my portfolio for things like counselling, men's behaviour change programs and so on.

This is the balance that we have tried to strike. It is tackling disadvantage, not through relying simply on the crisis services like statutory child protection, but through building a comprehensive system of health and wellbeing and support for families, ranging from the universal early years services right through, tackling specific areas of disadvantage with a focus on early childhood. There is a map showing how the family support innovation projects have gone from being piloted to being across many parts of the state. This budget announces a further 12 projects, including four indigenous projects.

The Office for Children is a major new initiative announced in December last year. One of its clear goals is to focus on the outcomes for children — what is actually the result for children in terms of their health, wellbeing and education. That will be a big job for everyone in government — it is not just about the Office for Children or the Minister for Children; it is about the whole of government supporting that priority. We are uniquely placed to learn from new evidence and new ideas. That relates to the scientific evidence about how children's brains develop very early on, the need to support them, provide stability and a caring adult. This budget puts money into that.

The CHAIR — Minister, I refer you to the family support innovations projects I have heard you speak about these in the past and how they are cutting the child abuse rates in some of our most disadvantaged communities. Could you describe to the committee progress to date on those in relation to how they have been cutting abuse and the decisions that you have made to further extend them?

Ms GARBUTT — We know that every year there are families and children who need extra support. We pay particular attention to that, particularly to the vulnerable children. The innovations projects have been front and centre a critical part of the effort we have put into new investment for earlier intervention and prevention. So not waiting until the crisis occurs, child protection is brought in and the whole situation is very difficult; but supporting parents much earlier when the early signs of problems and difficulties are apparent. The family support innovations projects represent \$60 million-plus over four years investment. That has really doubled the level of funds available for family services across Victoria.

They have two key objectives. The first one is to divert a significant proportion of families who are currently notified to child protection into community based services and into support rather than child protection and the crises that that represents; and secondly, to minimise the number of notifications of that child and family back again and again. It has become clear that families often have ongoing problems which are not easily resolved and are not always at the level of child protection. Child protection really is an emergency service that comes in, identifies problems and makes sure the child is safe, but then moves out. The family support innovations projects stay with the family for a long time. They offer flexible support so they are able to try to prevent the family slipping into further problems.

In 2002 we started with eight innovation projects at the cost of \$3.7 million. They were established at various places around the state, but included two indigenous projects in East Gippsland and greater Shepparton. In 2003 we had four more projects: two indigenous ones and two mainstream ones. Last year we established 17 more projects, and this year 12 new projects. They have certainly moved well beyond the pilot stages into much more mainstream. They involve an extensive analysis of the local circumstances and local issues that are impacting on families, involving all the community support agencies that you would think of in terms of family support, but also the police, schools, hospitals and community health centres. They are all establishing a local network and identifying what their priorities should be. There is extra funding for family support services which the local network identifies how it will be best used, whether it is extra help for mothers with new babies or whether it is teenagers or some other need they identify.

We will have 39 new or existing projects and they will operate in 44 local government areas. Two or three local government areas have combined. They will account for approximately 62 per cent of all the notifications that child protection receives annually — that is the geographic area where 62 per cent of the notifications were received.

Before we took the step of moving beyond the pilot stage, we sought independent evaluation from La Trobe University. It came back with a positive evaluation. It said that while caution needs to be exercised when interpreting results in the initial stages, the analysis indicates reductions in child protection activities. That was very clear. It said:

These changes in child protection activity levels are in the desired direction and are indicative of positive program effects associated with the innovation.

We have based it on various sound information. I just want to compare that — —

The CHAIR — If you have some facts and figures, that would be good.

Ms GARBUTT — I just want to compare it to other jurisdictions interstate where child protection notifications are still rising dramatically. In Victoria in 2002-03 and 2003-04 they fell by 1.8 per cent. That is not a huge decline, but in the context where every other state was rising, we should not underestimate the significance of that. It shows that they are working.

Mr FORWOOD — Minister, just to return to Ms Callister's response to my questions about the implementation of changes at Malmsbury, I would be interested to know when the changes did occur, but I wonder if you could advise the committee how many staff are now on the evening shift and whether the evening shift differs from the others shifts throughout the day. When you said four, was that four additional staff on each evening shift or just four in the pool?

Ms CALLISTER — As I understand it, it is four across the centre. So it is one additional per unit.

Mr FORWOOD — So how many are there per unit?

Ms CALLISTER — I will take that on notice.

Ms GREEN — This is more on young people in state care but sort of more generally. Aside from Malmsbury there has been quite a bit of commentary in the media in recent months about the challenges for young people in state care. Could you inform the committee of what the government is doing to ensure that young people in care are adequately looked after?

Ms GARBUTT — Young people in state care — particularly in residential care — you would have to say are the most damaged and the most vulnerable young people in the state. We have been expanding the number of projects and programs to try to better support these young people. When they come into care they often have very difficult behaviours because of past abuse or neglect. They only come into care as a result of a decision by the Children's Court that they cannot remain at home safely. Nevertheless, they are vulnerable, difficult and they are often very damaged. Of course the first thing you do is try to prevent that in the first place. That is why we have invested so heavily in the innovations projects to try to reduce that child abuse and to try to keep young people in their homes, but safely. That is a long-term thing and we will have to wait for results for a few years.

Apart from those innovations projects, which we have clearly invested in very heavily and are starting to have results, we also established a new statewide counselling service called Finding Solutions. This comes into play at the point when a young person or teenager is about to leave home because the relationship with the family seems to have broken down or deteriorated and they are at risk of leaving home. This was based on a very successful model program in the eastern region of Melbourne where it had good results. We have now funded that statewide. It provides a rapid response to teenagers and families in that situation to try to resolve some of those issues and keep at them home with improved relationships. So we have now expanded that to all regions.

Ms GREEN — How did the referrals occur to that service? How did they come about?

Ms CALLISTER — When there are young people brought to the attention of child protection who would in fact benefit from being diverted to this service initially as mediation between themselves and their parents to try to deal with their behaviours and come to a solution which is better than just a child protection response, that is what happens; they go. Obviously for very serious cases they do not have to be diverted through a mediation program, but where there are issues of parents and children or young people in conflict and behavioural issues, there is a lot of evidence — as the minister said — that mediation approaches are more successful.

Ms GARBUTT — It is a good program. It has had very strong success in the eastern region. Many of those children and young people who are already in the care system have quite complex and assorted issues; ones that are not easily fixed and need a lot of work over a period of years. We are trying to expand the range of programs that are offered to these children — for example, we are purchasing a property in Hurstbridge, in your electorate. That is around \$3.2 million in purchase price and set-up price. That will be a therapeutic program. Young people will work with animals, with horticulture; there is a mechanical workshop on site and so on, and there will be 24-hour supervision. That will be an alternative. It will get them out of their troubled daily life and offer them a fresh start.

A bigger program is the Take Two service, which is a \$20 million program offering a range of therapeutic services to children and young people who are displaying severe emotional and behavioural disturbance as a result of past abuse or neglect. Seventy per cent of the clients for Take Two over the first 12 months — it has only been up and running for 12 months — were residing in out-of-home care. That is actually focusing on the needs of children — not just immediately make them safe, but trying to get to some of the underlying problems, or rather the resulting problems.

We have also started trials of therapeutic foster care. This is a much more intensive level of support in foster care that provides support not just for the child but also for the carers. Carers receive much more professional training, much more intense support, so that they are better to deal with some of the quite complex and challenging behaviour of these young people. The carers are better remunerated as well to reflect the intensity that they are expected to be put in. In addition, I recently launched a project with Jim Stynes's Reach organisation and with Whitelion, headed up by Glenn Manton. They are going to provide a mentoring service to those young people in residential care — a bit better support for them; older role models who are able to help them through some of their difficulties and really offer some alternatives.

One interesting further model we have also funded is from the southern region, where Menzies services have already been running very successful anger replacement therapy using art to allow a young person to express their aggression and their difficult behaviour. That has had quite a bit of success. We are funding that as well. We are trying to expand the number of options.

Mr CLARK — Minister, I refer again to the situation at Malmsbury and to the media release issued by your predecessor on 15 September 2000 announcing the government's response to the Baird report, including stating that she had ordered the Department of Human Services to develop management plans for difficult clients; tighten the monitoring and administration of leave; develop strategies for staff to prevent and deal with assaults; tighten procedures for searches and the prevention of substance abuse and several other measures. She then went on to say:

... in addition to the reforms that I have announced I am ordering further independent reviews of Malmsbury Juvenile Justice Centre to monitor and report on the progress of the implementation strategy.

Fear and violence have no place in our juvenile justice centres.

Following on from that, your response mentioned some subsequent reviews. As I understand it, the Falconer review dealt solely with the aspect of leave from the centre. Could I ask you what other independent reviews have been carried out in accordance with your predecessor's commitment and what did they cover and what did they find? Given the previous minister's commitments and the remedial action that was put in place, how is it that the further problems that Mr Forwood referred to earlier have been able to recur, despite all of this?

Ms GARBUTT — Clearly I was not the minister when this was put out. It is interesting though, is it not, that it was released with a press release when you claimed it was not even available.

Mr FORWOOD — It does not say that Mr Baird's report was released, and if you read it carefully you will see that.

Ms GARBUTT — It was released to the *Herald Sun* and the *Age*. You are just barking up the wrong tree; you have got that wrong. You cannot get a much more public release of something than a press release and into the papers.

Mr FORWOOD — They did not release the document at the time.

Ms GARBUTT — My advice is that it was and that all the recommendations have been implemented.

Mr FORWOOD — Tell us about the independent review then.

Mr MERLINO — Wait for the answer, Bill.

Ms GARBUTT — You have asked the question and I am answering it.

Mr CLARK — You are playing politics, Minister, let us get to the substance of the question.

Ms GARBUTT — Who is playing politics, I have to ask you?

Mr CLARK — I think it is far too serious to — —

The CHAIR — Can we let the minister respond to the question.

Ms GARBUTT — I will have to ask Gill to respond because clearly I was not around in 2000 as minister. Patricia? No. Gill was not there either.

Ms FAULKNER — In relation to independent reviews, I do not believe there has been another one other than the Falconer review. What we did at the time, however, in response to the Baird review, was to change the management arrangements substantially to bring the two juvenile justice centres — —

Ms CALLISTER — Three.

Ms FAULKNER — Three, sorry. There were two in one region and one in another — all under central management in head office. We appointed a new overseer to go through all of the arrangements. We have changed the management in, I think, all of the centres since then, but I doubt that there has been another independent review. There have been other actions taken in relation to strengthening and to — what we said earlier — implementing those recommendations.

Mr CLARK — In the light of recent developments is a further independent review being contemplated at this stage?

Ms GARBUTT — No, it is not. As I said before, we thought this case was an isolated case. There are incidents, of course — this is a correctional facility — but it does not indicate systemic problems.

Ms ROMANES — Minister, I note that in budget paper 3 on both pages 6 and 274, and in your presentation, that you drew the attention of the committee to the substantial extra investment in children's services to the tune of \$100 million in the budget. Can you provide the committee with some more information about the increase in the long-day care per capita rate for services which are providing the kindergarten program?

Ms GARBUTT — At the heart of this initiative is a strong commitment to children all participating in a year of funded kindergarten. We believe that is a vital universal service. There is a very strong body of research now that demonstrates that quality kindergarten programs improve children's learning, their health and their behaviour, and that has an impact right through into their adult life so it is absolutely critical.

It is even more marked and more important and critical for children who are experiencing some form of disadvantage. They have a bigger benefit, if you like, than other children do. Children living in circumstances that put them at some risk, some vulnerability, including poverty, maternal depression and other things are more likely to succeed at school if they have attended kindergarten. Kindergarten actually starts to close a gap between disadvantaged children and others. It is absolutely vital and something to which we are quite committed. Since we were elected in 1999 we have maintained a very clear focus on revitalising children's services. We have boosted funding and following this year's state budget we can say we have boosted funding by 74 per cent for kindergartens.

Turning to the child care centres, we have put in nearly \$20 million over the next four years for those children who are attending long-day care child care and 4-year-olds who are attending those centres currently usually do not get a kindergarten program — a particular kinder education program within the child care centre. Of course that particularly affects children where both parents work and parents often have to make a decision when they have a

4-year-old in child care — does someone drop out of work for a year or go back to part-time work, or does the child miss out on a kinder education?

That is a dreadful decision for anyone to have to make. Clearly the answer has been to encourage child-care centres to provide that separate kinder education program for four-year-olds within that setting. This indeed was a recommendation arising out of the Premier's Children's Advisory Committee that we have accepted.

Currently child-care centres are paid a lower per capita price for their four-year-olds if they provide kindergartens, and some do provide it, but the per capita grant is only \$857 currently for a four-year-old in a kindergarten compared to \$1325 for the full day care rate. We are going to list that rate over the next few years, until 2009. The long day care rate for a child attending a kindergarten program in a child-care centre will be the same as if they are attending a regular stand-alone kindergarten.

I hasten to add that this is not a threat to stand-alone kindergartens. They will continue to operate. They do a fantastic job. These is obviously a very strong place for them to be, and we will support that. There are no plans to diminish their role. What we are saying is that four-year-olds in child care also need that opportunity to attend a kindergarten program. So we are hoping that we can increase the number. Currently only around 43 per cent of long day care services offer that kindergarten in their setting so we want to increase that up so that no four-year-old is going to miss out.

Mr FORWOOD — Minister, in relation to child protection, I understand the process is that if a child absconds from a child protection placement, the agency is required to swear out a warrant, and then of course get them returned to the placement. I wonder, firstly, if you could advise the committee how many warrants were sworn out in the last year? I wonder if you could tell us how much it cost to relocate these absconders and return them to their placement, and finally while they are away, does the agency continue to get paid? For example, I am aware that one absconder was away for five weeks. Does the agency continue to get paid for the five weeks while not caring for the absconder who has shot through?

Ms GARBUTT — We are talking about children about whom the Children's Court decided that they cannot stay at home — they cannot live at home safely — and so they have to live out of home. Often these are the most vulnerable and most difficult children that we have in the state, but they are living out of home because of a decision by the Children's Court about their safety within their family. These are not children who have committed any crimes. They are not locked up. They are not inmates. They are not prisoners. These are children who are very vulnerable and who have often in many cases had years of neglect or abuse. Given that history, they are often quite difficult, quite vulnerable and quite complex. They do have placements where they are cared for and supported, and everyone aims to give them the best quality care.

Mr FORWOOD — Of course.

Ms GARBUTT — They can, of course, leave. Your children and mine do not stay at home 24 hours a day. They go to school or they go out with friends. They do a whole range of things. When they go missing, of course then action has to be taken, and the appropriate action is set out and warrants need to be taken out with the police, and are taken out. I will have to ask Gill to comment on the details of this. I am not sure that we have all of that sort of information collected together.

Ms CALLISTER — Thank you, Minister. When a young person goes missing from their placement, the instruction is that a missing person's report has to be filed with the police. Where that young person goes missing from a community service agency, it has to be filed by the community service agency themselves and child protection have to be advised of that — otherwise child protection may make the missing person's report as well.

At the same time, if it is considered that it may be difficult to locate the young person or if it may be difficult to return them once they are located, then consideration is given to whether a warrant is applied for as well. In a large number of cases, particularly where we are concerned about young people's behaviour, a warrant would be sought from the Children's Court, which involves making an affidavit to the Children's Court and the Children's Court granting a warranty. There is are 16 different types of warrants that the Children's Court can give for a number of different reasons, and I do not know if the committee wants me to go through each of those — —

Mr FORWOOD — I am happy to take it on notice. That would be terrific if you could.

Ms CALLISTER — In relation to the most common warrant, which is the section 265 warrant, one of the reasons for seeking the warrant is that it then acts as an alert to the police, so it goes into their system in such a way as complements a missing person's report, and when the police locate that young person it gives them the power to execute the warrant, which in ordinary terms means it gives them the power to take the young person and return them to wherever is specified on the warrant.

If a warrant is not active and if the young person refuses to go with the police, and unless they have been arrested or they are in some imminent danger, the police do not have any power to physically pick them up and put them in the car, it is a complementary process, but it always commences with a missing person's report followed by consideration of a warrant. They may be done at exactly the same time, so warrants are often sought after hours and sought from on-call magistrates overnight. That is not uncommon.

In terms of payment, if a young person goes missing from a residential unit that, say, has four young people living in it, it would be difficult to reduce payment given that the staffing level would need to remain the same for the remaining residents, and in addition one of the things that community organisations often do is go out looking for young people, so if they think they know where they may be or that they may be in various locations with friends or family, they may go out and try to engage the young person and return them, so sometimes they would bring on additional staff to do that and leave the other staff remaining in the unit with the other residents.

Mr FORWOOD — Thank you for the offer of getting back to us on this. I would be interested to know the additional cost of this part of the process on the existing contribution towards looking after these vulnerable kids.

Mr SOMYUREK — Minister, firstly, thank you very much for your description about the benefits that that preschool year has for children. This is of particular interest to me and my constituents. Parts of Eumemmerring Province are some of the fastest growing areas in Australia and certainly it has a very young demographic with young families, so that is very helpful. Could you please provide more information about the increase in the kindergarten fee subsidy for health care card holders, and I refer you to budget paper 3, pages 6 and 274?

Ms GARBUTT — Thank you very much. I did mention how it is even more important for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. It helps them to close that gap. So we are very keen to make sure that preschool is able to be accessed by all children, particularly those who are suffering some disadvantage of one sort or another. We have put a big priority on that since we came to office to boost the access to kindergartens, and to ensure that as many children as possible can attend. In the past, for example, we put lot of funds into making sure that children with disabilities were able to attend.

This year in this budget we have put in an extra \$4 million, or \$4.1 million, to increase the fee subsidy for children from low-income facilities —for health care cardholders. That also applies to families that have triplets or quadruplets all attending in the one year. I have a family in my electorate where that is the case and so that is a huge burden on them.

So what we are trying to do is ensure that health care cardholders are able to afford the kinder fees, and that is regardless of their circumstances. In the past, in 2000, we increased that fee subsidy from \$100 to \$250 so that was a huge boost. This year for the current students or children the subsidy was indexed by the non-government price index which went to \$255. So the current level is \$255. This budget means that next year's children will get an extra 25 per cent up to \$320. So that subsidy will increase from \$255 to \$320, and it will increase and be indexed annually after that. For this next year it is an extra \$80 per term, so that is a big increase. I think that will make a big difference to a lot of parents. It represents a 220 per cent increase since 1999. So that really does show that we are very serious about making sure that preschool is accessible and affordable for children.

We calculate that that will mean 15 000 children in Victoria will get that extra benefit — that is health care cardholders. They represent over 26 per cent of all children attending kindergarten so that is a big proportion and that is why it is costing \$4 million of course. We think that on the 2004 data that will mean 35 per cent of children attending kinder in rural areas and 23 per cent of children attending in metro areas.

Interestingly, the term fee paid by parents for a kindergarten program in 2004 was around \$140 in community-based kindergartens. That fee will come down to around \$60 per term with this subsidy. It has been universally welcomed, as you can imagine. I have read in the papers that Simone Kelsall, who is a single mum with

four kids, said it will make a huge difference, and Kindergarten Parents Victoria, the peak body for kinder committees, has welcomed it as well, talking about welcome relief for low-income families. So it is a great thing to be doing.

Mr CLARK — A spokeswoman for you is quoted in the *Sunday Age* last as saying that the government is working towards state-based regulations of family day care. I ask you is the spokesperson correct in what she says? If so, at this stage what does it envisage that state-based regulation will entail in terms of additional obligations on family day care centres and/or additional supervision? What is the expected cost to the budget of state regulation of family day care and has that been provided for at present? When do you expect state-based regulation of family day care to be implemented?

Ms GARBUTT — This was an interesting article last week because it arose out of some very misleading and irresponsible comments by the federal minister Kay Patterson in regard to Whitehorse council's family day care where the son of a carer has been charged with some offences against children. She was implying that there is no regulation for family day care.

Let us go through it. Family day care is funded by Canberra. Kay Patterson herself provides the funding for family day care. She credits the family day care operators. Local government in most cases operates it and has its own regulations, and in the case of Whitehorse council it has very strict regulations in place about assessment of carers, including police checks, and monitoring, including unannounced monthly visits to family day carers. So there are already regulations in place — very strict and very carefully monitored — for family day care.

Despite the fact that it is actually a federally funded program we are working towards state-based regulations in order to provide uniformity but for anybody to claim that these are not regulated is nonsense and mischievous.

Mr CLARK — That is the first part of my question; you are moving towards state-based regulations. You have not addressed anything relating to cost, what it is going to consist of, or the time lines.

Ms GARBUTT — I said we are moving towards that in family day care. I have also pointed out the active operating arrangements at the moment.

Mr CLARK — I am happy for you take the remainder on notice if that is easier for you.

Ms GARBUTT — No, we can answer that.

Ms FAULKNER — In terms of the cost of it, we are engaged in discussions at the moment about the nature of the regulatory scheme, and we will not be putting a proposal in relation to costs until we get a good deal of consensus and agreement about the nature of the regulatory regime. As the minister has pointed out, it is already to some extent regulated by the funders and there will be discussions between us, the federal government and local government in order to say, 'Well, can we build something that is perhaps less expensive given the number of parties that are already involved in this area?'. I would say that probably the regulatory regime would be developed within the first half of this financial year coming.

Mr MERLINO — Minister, my question relates to the Best Start projects and I refer to pages 6, 270 and 274 of the budget paper 3. I understand that there is additional funding to fund another 10 Best Start projects throughout the state. Could you please advise the committee what has been achieved through the Best Start projects to date and where the new projects are likely to be?

Ms GARBUTT — Thank you. Best Start is a relatively new initiative. Essentially it aims to support parents and communities, families and service providers and to bring them together and to improve delivery of services in terms of child health, child care and so on, and ensure that children are ready for school when they need to go. It is based on the very strong body of international research which has stressed the importance of the early years, how critical it is for children's brain development and development in every way, and what a lifelong impact those early years have and how important early years' services are.

We have a great range of early years services. Other states and overseas envy the maternal and child health service and envy the preschool system as well. So we need to build on those but what we have to do is ensure that all Victorian children no matter what their circumstances are able to access the services and get that benefit. We have

made that a priority; we have increased funding for early years services by 65 per cent since we came to government.

We started in 2002 with 13 projects in various locations, generally ones of some disadvantage and they formed local partnerships with schools, parents, the elders if it is an aboriginal Best Start, health services and local governments and so on, and developed their own strategies, so they are locally identified strategies. We provide the information but they identify the strategies needed to make sure the children access the services and we get improved outcomes for the children. And we have specific ones for Aboriginal communities, in Horsham, for example, and one in Morwell. We are expanding those as well.

This year's state budget allocates 14 new projects at just over \$10 million. Four of them will be Aboriginal-specific ones. We have not finalised all sites but we are looking with local government at Latrobe, Central Goldfields, Mildura, Darebin, Brimbank, Melton, Greater Dandenong and Cardinia, so this is good news for some of us around the table. Just to give you some examples of what they are doing — it is hard to say exactly what they are doing because they are all different but a lot of them are trying to improve access —

The CHAIR — In order to assist us in our work, when you do that could you tie it in with what would be the key performance indicators because we are trying to keep each question to round about 4 minutes.

Ms GARBUTT — Okay. The member identified the budget pages 6, 270 and 274, so we can certainly provide that. Examples include where a playgroup has been attached to the maternal and child health sessions so there is ready access between those two activities; parent lunches with free child care providing parent information; and outreach immunisation sessions at, for example, the end of the playgroup or maternal and child health sessions. It is about trying to encourage access to another service based on the first one. There is a range of very good activities happening there.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much, Minister.

Mr FORWOOD — The federal government has offered \$17.5 million to Victoria for additional respite care for aged carers. This is conditional on matching funding. I wonder if you could advise the committee how close we are to finalising the agreement with the federal government and whether or not the Victorian government is committed to putting in the full \$17.5 million. My understanding is it looks like we are a million or two short. Finally, could you tell the committee how you propose to ensure that the funds do in fact go to parent carers over 70 and parent carers between the ages of 65 and 69?

Ms GARBUTT — The commonwealth's first offer was \$15 million. We persuaded it to lift it so that we got a fairer share — they were not recognising our proportion of population. The first thing I did was to make sure we got more out of the commonwealth government. It was not us falling short, it was us persuading the commonwealth to offer more in the first place. Secondly, the agreement is nearly concluded. The problem was getting the commonwealth to match our money, not the other way around, so that is an interesting lack of research there, Bill.

Mr MERLINO — There is a common theme.

Ms GARBUTT — That happens, doesn't it? We have more than matched and I am pleased to say that that agreement is almost at a conclusion. No doubt the commonwealth minister and I will announce it together.

Mr FORWOOD — My information, and I stand to be corrected obviously by you —

Ms GARBUTT — You have been corrected.

Mr FORWOOD — I am quite happy, but let us put it on the record that the agreement states that the federal government money will be available on the basis of states putting in new money in the 2004–05 budget and the 2005–06 budget and for the four years of the agreement. If you would like to advise the committee how you get \$17.5 million in new money between then and now, I would appreciate it.

Ms GARBUTT — Because the agreement is due to start on 1 January — halfway through the 2004–05 budget — the money that was allocated in the 2004–05 budget actually counts, and the commonwealth minister has accepted that —

Mr FORWOOD — And that is \$7 million, and then there is \$9 million this year.

The CHAIR — Let the minister finish. Did you conclude? I thought you were mid-sentence.

Ms GARBUTT — I have said we have more than matched.

Mr FORWOOD — Perhaps you could demonstrate it.

Ms GARBUTT — I will demonstrate it by getting the commonwealth minister to sign up to it.

Mr FORWOOD — You could also provide the committee with the statistics.

Ms GARBUTT — When it is appropriate, because we will announce it together, when all that information is available — —

Mr FORWOOD — When do you think that will be?

Ms GARBUTT — Soon, Bill.

Mr FORWOOD — What is your definition of ‘soon’?

Ms GARBUTT — Not later, soon.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Minister. I would be interested in taking you to assisting young children with a disability and their parents in the disability budget. There are a number of initiatives in the budget papers to assist young children with a disability and their parents. Could you identify for us the project and the cost assigned to each? I understand the importance of this program, but I am really interested in the cost.

Ms GARBUTT — There are two key ones. One is the extra 460 places in the early childhood intervention services. That is \$8.6 million over four years. That will allow children with autism to enter into the early childhood intervention centres. That will be welcome news. Of course that comes on top of the extra \$6 million that we provided in the last election budget. That added a further 310 children to the early childhood intervention services including children with autism. That will be 770 places over the term of this government. That will be a big boost. There have been waiting lists and this will substantially reduce those.

On the other hand we recognise that parents of children with disabilities need extra support, particularly when they are young. We want to provide that support in flexible ways so in this budget we have allocated \$7.9 million over four years for a new range of support packages which will be very flexible. They will be for children with a disability including autism. We will tailor-make those packages to meet the particular needs of the children and their families. That may well include extra specialist services or therapy for the children, if that is what parents identify as their priority, or it might be other support services that help the family support and care for the child. We see that as a big boost to ease some of the additional pressures that are placed on families of children with disabilities.

Talking about autism, we have also had funding of \$400 000 in last year’s budget as a secondary consultation training strategy. That has gone to Monash University. That is available to early childhood intervention services staff and for kindergarten teachers, child-care operators and so on to help them understand the needs of children with autism and support them in that way. Of course the government has allocated \$16 million for children’s centres and new kindergartens. These aim to bring a whole range of early childhood services together. Several of them have incorporated early childhood intervention services, special children’s services or facilities for speech therapists, occupational therapists and so on. They are also helping to meet the needs of families of children with disabilities.

Mr CLARK — I wonder if you could tell us either now or on notice in respect of the last few years for each of the three juvenile justice facilities in Victoria what have been the actual and what for the future are expected to be the numbers of clients that will be housed in each, what the cost per client will be, and what numbers have been participating in pre-release? Also, can you tell us what you expect the effect will be on these factors of the move to have all 17-year-olds accommodated within the juvenile justice system?

The CHAIR — Did you get all those components?

Mr CLARK — I can recap: in terms of per facility, the numbers of clients, the cost per client and the numbers participating in pre-release programs.

Ms GARBUTT — I have some of the information about the change in age jurisdiction, but we might need to take some of that on notice.

Ms FAULKNER — There is a figure in the budget papers for the cost of the change in age jurisdiction, we are just looking for it at the moment. The other part was?

Mr CLARK — Just in terms of the number of clients in each facility over recent years, have you got a cost per client?

Ms FAULKNER — We do keep records of the number of clients in each facility. We do not generally have a cost per client in that fashion because in the same way as other correctional facilities, there is a facility fee and you have to continue to keep places open because you cannot always be sure how many people are going to be in it. We do not say, 'This is the total cost divided by the number of inmates at any point in time'. We do not do it that way, but we certainly have a cost annually of running the facility and the number of — —

Mr CLARK — If you could let us know that.

Ms GARBUTT — And I can provide some of the preliminary estimates about the impact of the legislative change to the age jurisdiction. We are expecting an additional 200 to 300 children and young people on community-based orders — they are not in custodial facilities — and an additional 20 to 30 in custody. There is a new 26-bed secure unit at the Melbourne Juvenile Justice Centre which is very soon due for completion. That will be fully commissioned and ready for occupancy to coincide with the age change, which, of course, comes in on 1 July. That will function as a remand unit which will free up space in other areas.

Ms FAULKNER — I refer you to table A1, page 270 of budget paper 3, which shows the change to age jurisdiction in the Children's Court. A cost is predicted across the next four financial years, which is \$6.3 million this year, \$5.9 million, \$6.1 million and \$6.2 million.

Ms GARBUTT — And I think we have found some targets as well.

Ms CALLISTER — There are a series, some of which are new measures. So a new measure is introduced for 2005–06 which results from the age jurisdiction change. The change redefines seniors from 15 to 17 years, and juniors to under 15 years. The 2005–06 target is a male senior 15-plus custodial capacity number of 192, which is an occupancy rate. The male senior youth training centre custodial capacity is now discontinued in favour of that new measure. The youth training centre occupancy rate is 90 per cent, so there are 192 clients but an occupancy rate of 90 per cent. Then there is a new measure on the bed capacity of males under 15 years, and female youth training centre facilities of 42 per cent, and two discontinued measures in that regard.

Mr CLARK — Can I just clarify that. I understand the redefinition of the measures because of the picking up of the 17-year-olds. In terms of the actual physical facilities and the numbers of capacity, are the two discontinued series and the specified series comparable? In other words, do you have a continuum in terms of capacity even though you have changed the specification to refer to the fact that you are now accommodating 17-year-olds?

Ms CALLISTER — Yes.

Mr CLARK — Thank you.

Ms ROMANES — Minister, my question is about the government's reform of Victoria's child protection and family support system. Could you update the committee on where things are at with regard to legislation and policy?

Ms GARBUTT — As you would be aware, over the past two years I have been undertaking a major overhaul of the child protection legislation in Victoria. I think it is fair to say that some parts of the act are working well and will not be subject to any change, and that includes mandatory reporting. But there are some shortcomings in the act that restrict our capacity to respond well and that is what I am looking at. Families are much more complex now than when the act came into place in the 1980s, and we also know much more about the importance

of children's development, as I have been saying in relation to kinders and child health. That also impacts on child protection, and we have to respond to that. What we know is that instability in foster care, moving between placements and attempted reunification with families that might fail, has an enormous impact on children, and it is something that we have to seriously address.

One of the major deficiencies in the current act is in the [inaudible] and the community service organisations and family support organisations that are out there in the community supporting families are separate from the child protection system. We need to bring them together in a much more unified way so that they do not operate separately. We also need to try and shift the emphasis back into prevention, as I have been talking about with the innovations projects, and the current act does not support that very well. It really leaves child protection as an emergency response, when it is too late, and it does not meet the needs of modern families. So for those reasons we have had to address it.

The complexity of families who come into the child protection system has grown enormously. Now families have combinations of long-term problems including poverty, substance abuse, disability, mental illness and family violence. Most families have more than one; some have several. So they are posing enormous difficulties for a service that is designed as an emergency response rather than putting in place preventive support measures. The problem is also ongoing and recurring. The way we have designed the innovations project it will get in early and support families for the long term, and not move in and out as child protection is required to do. The scientific knowledge that I mentioned is about the brain development of young children, and about the impact on unstable care and broken relationships, which can set them back for life. So we have to address those issues.

We have developed a reform agenda around four main aims reflecting those changes. They are: providing support for the development of all children; identifying vulnerable children and families before they come into the child protection system; diverting children at risk into community-based care — so to those community-based agencies; and offering flexible alternatives to them when they need help. Whenever children need to be removed from their families because of dangers to them, they should be provided with high-quality care and an emphasis is put on stability. It is not about churning around in the out-of-home care system. We have emphasised putting children first in all services and in all decision making, so not focusing on parents' problems but on the child and making sure that children are at the heart of decision making across the services that deal with families. So we will be promoting that.

Many of the legislative reforms that we are talking about will build on what we have already learnt through the innovations projects, and that will involve information sharing among the network of agencies, about strengthening local responses, about integrating services so that there are a whole range of services integrated, cooperating and working together to support a family rather than isolated services doing their own bit and families often falling between the cracks waiting for child protection to pick them up at a crisis level. So it is strengthening local planning and the collaboration between agencies.

Stability has been an area of some interest. It is certainly not our intention to remove children from their families more often, but to recognise that when we keep trying and failing to reunify them with their family, it is doing the child damage and we need to move in a much more timely fashion to plan for permanent care. We keep trying to reunify and that will be the first priority. We believe children are better off at home with their families, but if that is not going to work we need to put a trigger into the planning process — which will be the age of the child and how long they have been away from home — to say when we need to think about something more permanent for this child because instability does them permanent damage for the rest of their life.

That is a key part of that. While we are trying to reunify children we do support the family. We try to emphasise overcoming their problems rather than having an adversarial situation in the court. So we are actually moving towards alternative dispute resolution systems, where everyone sits down says, 'What are the problems and how do we overcome them? How can this child go safely back home?', but stability is the driving principle behind all of that.

Mr FORWOOD — I think that is excellent. My question is also about child protection. I wonder if you could either answer now or take on notice the following questions: how many child protection workers were recruited in each of the past two years; how much was spent on training the new child protection workers in each of the past two years; and what was the amount of premiums for WorkCover paid on child protection workers for each of the past two years?

Ms GARBUTT — I will take that on notice and get back to you with an answer, but I would also stress that we have put a lot of effort into greater support for families at an earlier stage; we are building the fence at the top of the cliff rather than — —

Mr FORWOOD — Catch them when they fall.

Ms GARBUTT — That is right. I do want to correct a figure I just mentioned before about the commonwealth respite offer. It was originally \$16.2 million. I think I said it was around \$15 million. It was \$16.2 million; it is going up to \$17.4 million as a result of our representations.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Minister. On behalf of the committee, I thank you and I appreciate the fact that you have given us a thorough briefing on the portfolios of community services and children. I thank the departmental officers, many of whom are here and who have done copious quantities of work for today, so thank you very much. Our secretariat will be following up with some additional questions together with the ones you have taken on notice. When the Hansard transcript is available to the committee, we will forward it to you. Thank you, and good afternoon.

Committee adjourned.