

# **PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE**

## **Inquiry into the 2022-23 Budget Estimates**

Melbourne—Monday, 23 May 2022

### **MEMBERS**

Ms Lizzie Blandthorn—Chair

Mr Danny O'Brien—Deputy Chair

Mr Rodney Barton

Mr Sam Hibbins

Mr Gary Maas

Mrs Beverley McArthur

Mr James Newbury

Ms Pauline Richards

Mr Tim Richardson

Ms Nina Taylor



**WITNESSES**

Mr Anthony Carbines MP, Minister for Child Protection and Family Services,

Ms Brigid Sunderland, Secretary,

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

Ms Janine Toomey, Senior Executive Director, Community Operations and Practice Leadership, and

Mr Andrew Minack, Deputy Secretary, Corporate and Delivery Services, Department of Families, Fairness and Housing.

**The CHAIR:** I declare open these hearings of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee, and because I have limited voice the Deputy Chair will take us through the statement.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Carrying the Labor Party on my back. I ask that mobile telephones please be turned to silent.

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

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

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

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

I welcome the minister for child protection as well as officers from the department, and I invite the minister to make an opening statement of 10 minutes. Be quick, Minister. This will be followed by questions from the committee.

**Mr CARBINES:** Thanks very much, Mr O'Brien, committee members and Chair. I would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we meet today and pay my respects to their elders both past and present.

**Visual presentation.**

**Mr CARBINES:** Everything we do of course and every investment we make is to keep children safe and families strong. Through the hardships of COVID-19 we are working incredibly closely with the community, the child and family service partners, the Aboriginal community-controlled sector and our frontline child protection workforce to adapt and sustain our core service delivery; support the safety and wellbeing of children, young people and families; implement new programs bringing together health and social supports for families and communities in response to the challenges of COVID-19; better coordinate service delivery; and continue our drive and our long-term service system reforms, including through new and extended services such as the family preservation and reunification response and Home Stretch. We have built on established service delivery partnerships with stronger relationships than ever before, managing the service system, managing the impacts of the pandemic and delivering multiple reforms to reset the system.

I know that across the sector and government we are determined to keep making a difference for children and families throughout Victoria. That means maintaining our focus on early intervention to improve family functioning, keep children with their families and safely reunify children. It means more effectively linking services and building evidence across the system to enable more effective services more closely targeted to the needs of children and families. It means putting the child and family at the centre of our response and removing

barriers and increasing our wraparound support. It also means continuing to embed the principles of Aboriginal self-determination and Aboriginal self-management into all our programs, policies and initiative learnings and drawing from best practice embedded within Aboriginal services and models of care. We will continue to be there for Victorians when they need that support most.

Despite the pressures of the pandemic, we have continued to deliver on our promise to protect Victorian children in the last 12 months. This government is committed to build back better through the recovery from the pandemic. We have delivered considerable new investment to keep children and families safe and supported, and we have transformed that investment into innovative new service levels to better support children and families today to reshape the child and family system for the long term so it works better for children and families and more effectively improve our outcomes.

Some 1500 families, including over 400 Aboriginal families, have been connected to the family preservation and reunification response in its first 18 months of operation. We have expanded Home Stretch, our nation-leading program for supporting young people transitioning out of the care system, with more than 750 young people up to the age of 21 now being supported to remain with their carer or live independently. Our work continues in supporting Aboriginal self-determination and Aboriginal self-management for Aboriginal children and families, with some 217 Aboriginal children and young people supported by the Aboriginal Children in Aboriginal Care initiative. We are on track to meet the target of 252 children and young people by 30 June 2022.

We have stabilised and expanded our child protection workforce, recruiting over 400 child protection practitioners in 24 months. Since 2014 an additional 1180 child protection practitioners have been funded, and our Go Where You're Needed child protection workforce recruitment campaign has resulted in a 117 per cent increase in recruitment over the same period in the previous year. Our care services reforms and new evidence-based therapeutic models are improving the quality, safety and experience of care for children and young people. An additional 36 residential care beds are now available. Five further beds will be available in coming months, delivering improved outcomes to some of our most vulnerable children and young people.

Now, despite these achievements we know we must continue to invest to support at-risk children, families and carers. We need to support a diverse and sustainable community sector so that we meet the breadth and depth of the community needs across the state. So we are working across communities and across sectors to develop long-term reform plans that are transforming our support for vulnerable children and families. That is particularly happening through our *Roadmap for Reform: Strong Families, Safe Children; Wungurilwil Gapgapduir*, our Aboriginal children and families agreement and strategic plan; and our related policy platforms.

We need to keep focused on this work, to keep investing in children and families and to keep driving reform and improvement. That is why in 2022–23 we are investing some \$271.6 million across child protection and family services. It builds on last year's \$1.2 billion boost for at-risk children, their families and carers and brings total new investment in children and families to some \$2.9 billion over the four years from 2019–20 to 2022–23. In fact total annual investment has increased by over 35 per cent since the 2018–19 budget and by over 84 per cent since the 2015–16 budget.

We are investing heavily in transforming Victoria's child and family system by investing in supports for children and young people in care and the carers and workers who support them. The budget provides \$84.6 million over two years for improving the capacity mix of care services. This investment will provide funding to support existing demand for residential care, including an additional \$19 million in funding for enhanced supports for our most vulnerable children in residential care. Continuing the Care Hub trial and the CaringLife application investment in 2022–23 also includes some \$57.6 million over three years for responding to demand for child protection and family service to meet increasing demand for targeted and specialised family services. Now, that includes family services support for up to 1000 additional vulnerable families, support for child protection recruitment programs and a new carer help desk that will provide more streamlined support for children in care and their carers and will lessen the administrative burden on the child protection workforce.

We know that we need to do more to reduce the number of Aboriginal children and young people in care and the number of Aboriginal families in contact with the child protection system. *Wungurilwil Gapgapduir*, our Aboriginal children and families agreement, supports the government's commitment to increase Aboriginal self-determination and to ensure that all Aboriginal children and young people are safe and resilient and can thrive in culturally rich and strong Aboriginal families and communities. Since 2018 this government has invested over

\$160 million in new investments to implement *Wungurilwil Gagapduir* and its nation-leading initiatives. The 2022–23 budget invests some \$7.2 million over two years for advancing Aboriginal self-determination and closing the gap. This includes funding to continue the Aboriginal Children and Families Innovation and Learning Fund, which provides grants to ACCOs to research new programs and interventions and to embed innovation into practice. It includes funding for additional senior cultural advisers and internal Aboriginal cultural support and awareness advisers in child protection offices to build cultural competency and improve the cultural safety of Aboriginal children in care.

We are working with community services across the state to boost quality and safety and equip practitioners with the tools to achieve lasting change with families. The 2022–23 budget provides \$9.1 million over two years for improving the safety of children and young people in care services to deliver quality and enabling infrastructure, resulting in improved service delivery and better outcomes for children and families. This investment will boost safety measures for vulnerable children and young people through the Connect for Safety national child protection search tool, enhanced service delivery for high-risk young people in secure care and working with children checks for adult household members in kinship care placements. The investment also provides continued funding for a further two years to be used for the Outcomes, Practice and Evidence Network, OPEN, to continue at the same capacity to drive engagement and capacity-building activities in evidence-informed approaches.

The 2022–23 budget invests some \$9.8 million across two years in funding for statutory bodies and reforms, which will see the implementation of the *Child Wellbeing and Safety (Child Safe Standards Compliance and Enforcement) Amendment Act 2021*.

Our community service organisations have been outstanding in their dedication to supporting vulnerable Victorians through the pandemic. That is why we are investing some \$63.7 million over four years to support community sector jobs, with funding to cover minimum wage and consumer price index cost increases across CSOs that deliver social services on behalf of the government.

The 2022–23 budget also provides \$25.3 million in 2022–23 for civil claims costs for historical institutional child abuse, for settlement of civil claims for the historical institutional child abuse suffered by former wards of the state in the state's care.

We are also investing across the front line of our services to back up those working tirelessly to support at-risk Victorians, with \$2 million over four years for justice system costs associated with additional judicial resources and the extension of core programs, and \$1.8 million to fund a short extension of the coronavirus emergency response for children and young people program from 2021–22.

We are also investing \$10.4 million over three years to strengthen the community services workforce, building further on the work of the Go Where You're Needed campaign to undertake an attraction and recruitment effort that raises the profile of the community services workforce.

As I said at the outset, everything we do and every investment we make is to keep children safe and families strong. The 2022–23 budget investment of \$271.6 million across child protection and family services builds on last year's \$1.2 billion boost for at-risk children, their families and carers, totalling an investment that has increased by over 84 per cent since the 2015–16 budget. I look forward to our discussions, Chair.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Minister. Deputy Chair.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon, Minister and officials. Welcome. Minister, budget paper 3, page 38, lists the initiatives in your portfolio. Why is there no funding in the budget for an increase to the foster carer allowance?

**Mr CARBINES:** There are a range of initiatives that we have in place around our foster care services, and I will go to those in detail.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** I am speaking specifically about—

**Mr CARBINES:** In particular, understand that there is a range of things we have done that relate to initiatives in this year's budget. Firstly, back in October 2019—

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** No, sorry, Minister—

**Mr CARBINES:** No, no, this is about going to the context of—

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** With respect, I am not asking about other initiatives, I am asking about increasing the foster carer allowance.

**The CHAIR:** Mr O'Brien, if you could just allow the minister the opportunity to answer the question, that would be appreciated.

**Mr CARBINES:** This year's budget for foster carers and our other carers in our care system provides an additional \$5.8 million for the establishment of our carer support help desk to provide more streamlined supports for children in care and for kinship and foster carers. That came as a direct request from foster carers and the Foster Care Association of Victoria to see this initiative funded in the budget as a priority initiative to support our foster carers. That came out of our work in 2019 with *Strong Carers, Stronger Children*, a piece of work from the Victorian carer strategy that was launched, and then we have rolled through the initiatives from that time that have been priorities for foster carers. The help desk, with dedicated staff, will undertake a range of activities for children in care and their carers, including supporting access to services, obtaining key documents—so birth certificates, Medicare cards. The important aspect—

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Sorry, Minister, the question was specifically about the foster carer allowance. I would ask you to come back to answering that question.

**Mr CARBINES:** Yes, I am going to the support for foster carers in this budget.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** You can go to whatever you like; that is not the question I asked.

**The CHAIR:** Mr O'Brien, Mr Newbury, if you could allow the minister the opportunity to answer.

**Mr NEWBURY:** Me?

**The CHAIR:** Mr Newbury, you do not have the call.

**Mr NEWBURY:** I did not even speak.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Newbury.

**Mr NEWBURY:** Well, you cannot malign me when I did not even speak. Jeepers creepers!

**The CHAIR:** Mr Newbury, could you please stop interrupting. Mr O'Brien has the opportunity to ask the questions, and the minister needs to have the opportunity to answer them.

**Mr CARBINES:** And further—

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Minister, there has not been an increase in the foster carer allowance since 2016. Every other state indexes the foster carer allowance. Are you planning to do that at any stage?

**Mr CARBINES:** The Victorian government acknowledges the critical and significant role of carers to support children and young people in care, and we are committed to supporting foster and kinship and permanent carers and provide a range of supports currently, including in this budget, as I just outlined to you: the carer allowance to contribute towards the day-to-day costs of carers for children in their care; the client support funding, which includes client expenses and placement support brokerage for foster carers and kinship carers—

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** I am speaking specifically about the allowance, Minister.

**Mr CARBINES:** to help cover the cost of extraordinary expenses that they have beyond the day-to-day costs; and the support for carers to commence, maintain or sustain a placement. And that work happens out of the carers strategy that we developed in partnership with our care providers back in 2019. We are rolling through initiatives in this budget again through our carer help desk and the priorities of foster carers—

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Okay. Again, that is not related to the carer allowance, Minister.

**Mr CARBINES:** and what they are asking us to resource and to fund.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Can I go to the carer allowance? The government commissioned KPMG to undertake a review of the carer allowance. Did it recommend an increase to the foster care allowance and an increase to index that particular allowance?

**Mr CARBINES:** Well, the priorities that the government has in relation to resourcing in the budget for our carers relates to the carers strategy, the *Strong Carers, Stronger Children*.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** I understand that. I asked a specific question about the KPMG review.

**Mr CARBINES:** That is what we resource. We provide a carers allowance to our foster and kinship carers, and we also provide an opportunity for other assessments of particularly the carer allowance—so for those with additional needs and supports if there is capacity within the system—within the department to provide additional supports and an additional care allowance to different carer types within our system. That provides for the flexibility to deal with those needs.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Did the KPMG report recommend an increase?

**The CHAIR:** Mr O'Brien, the minister is attempting to answer your question.

**Mr NEWBURY:** No, he is not.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** No, he is not, with respect.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Newbury, with respect—

**Mrs McARTHUR:** Weasel words!

**The CHAIR:** Mr Newbury, Mrs McArthur, you do not have the call.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Can I ask again: did the KPMG report recommend an increase in the carer allowance?

**Mrs McARTHUR:** Yes or no.

**Mr CARBINES:** What I would say to you is that the—

**The CHAIR:** Mrs McArthur. Sorry, Minister. Mrs McArthur, could you please stop interrupting so the minister has opportunity to answer.

**Mr NEWBURY:** Well, he has had an opportunity. He just does not answer.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Newbury, Mrs McArthur, you are constantly interrupting, which is preventing the minister from the opportunity to answer the question. If you do not mind.

**Mr CARBINES:** As I said earlier, the priorities for the government are to continue to fund and resource the priorities of foster carers and kinship carers.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** You are not answering the question, Minister.

**Mr CARBINES:** And those determinations are made out of our *Strong Carers, Stronger Children* strategy, which we developed with our carers. And I am very pleased that they have welcomed the \$5.8 million in additional expenditure in this budget for our carer helpdesk, because that is the priority for our foster carers and our kinship carers in this budget.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Minister. Thank you, Mrs McArthur. The member's time has expired. Mr Maas.

**Mr MAAS:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Minister, for appearing—your first appearance, I believe, before PAEC—and thank you to your team as well for coming here this afternoon. Minister, if I could take you to budget paper 3, page 38, and I would like to speak to the importance of early intervention. You covered the importance of that in your presentation. I was wondering if you could inform the committee what investment is

being made into early intervention and the building of infrastructure to safeguard children, young people and families who are engaged with child protection.

**Mr CARBINES:** Thanks, Mr Maas, and can I just say that what is a real priority for us here is we need to increase the capacity of family services because more families will be supported earlier when they need it and before things escalate. We see an increase in the capacity of family services will also help divert vulnerable children and families away from the statutory child protection system. In 2022–23 in the budget we are investing some \$40.7 million for additional early intervention family services for up to an additional 1000 families each year, ensuring help is available before problems escalate. An additional \$21.4 million will assist up to 1600 families with disability receive the support that they need. This support will also provide for additional families to receive targeted and specialist casework and flexible funding to increase their parenting capacity, improve family functioning and provide practical support and services to promote safety, wellbeing and the development of children.

The budget 2022–23 also provides some \$4.8 million in 2022–23 and \$9.1 million over two years for improving the safety of children and young people in care services, delivering quality care and enabling infrastructure resulting in better outcomes for children and families. That is an investment that follows the \$328 million and the \$335 million in 2021–22 and 2020–21 respectively the Victorian government allocated over four years to children and family services to support a range of early intervention and support programs. This included support for targeted family services, the family preservation and reunification response, the family group conferencing trial, Putting Families First, embedded family services in universal settings and Koori supported playgroups.

We are starting to see the results of this increased investment in early help and early intervention. The family preservation and reunification response, first funded in September 2020 and expanded in August 2021, has some 33 organisations, including 12 Aboriginal community-controlled organisations, delivering the response to some 1500 Victorian families. That includes 400 Aboriginal families. So the early results from the response suggest that the program's intensity is not only supporting strong engagement with families but it is providing the basis to build increased stability and parenting confidence. It is also driving substantial system benefits such as new workforce capabilities, linked data assets and evidence-informed practices that are being trialled and evaluated. That is going to help us better understand and track what works to identify families and children at risk of entering into care at the earliest opportunity. The investment forms part of what the government's early intervention investment framework seeks to do, which is to rebalance the service system towards early intervention and diversion. If we can do that, we can optimise children and family outcomes and reduce the demand for acute services.

The government is continuing funding of the Outcomes, Practice and Evidence Network—which I touched on in my presentation—OPEN, in the 2022–23 budget, investing another \$600 000 over the next couple of years. That funding drives our capacity-building activities to support sector-led evaluation and research to build local evidence. And just lastly on that, it is just crucial that we progress to an evidence-informed service system for vulnerable children and families, and this commitment to OPEN supports longstanding efforts between the government, and I want to commend the community services organisations and the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare for their work and commitment to drive these reforms.

**Mr MAAS:** Terrific. Thank you very much for that. Just given the time that is left, I might leave it there. Thank you, Chair.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Mr Maas. Mr Hibbins.

**Mr HIBBINS:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Minister and your team, for appearing this afternoon. I want to ask first about the rate of removal for First Nations children, which has been increasing in Victoria continuously for a decade. My understanding is that First Nations children in Victoria are actually 17.2 times more likely to be in out-of-home care than non-First Nations children, and that makes us second only to WA in terms of high rates. Why aren't we making any progress towards the Closing the Gap target to reduce the rate of Aboriginal children in out-of-home care by 45 per cent within a decade?

**Mr CARBINES:** Sure. Thanks, Mr Hibbins. The government has committed to reducing the over-representation of Aboriginal children involved with child protection and placed in care. We have signed the

Closing the Gap national agreement, which includes a target to reduce the rate of representation of Aboriginal children in care by 45 per cent, as you touched on, over the next decade. The agreed actions in *Wungurilwil Gapgapduir*, our Aboriginal children and families agreement, set the foundations on how we are going to achieve the target. So the 2022–23 budget has \$7.174 million over two years to advance Aboriginal self-determination and implementation of our tripartite agreement—that is *Wungurilwil Gapgapduir*. But that is on top of the more than \$160 million of new investment from the government since 2018. *Wungurilwil Gapgapduir* supports the government’s commitment to increased self-determination for Aboriginal people, to ensuring Aboriginal children and young people are safe and resilient and also that it be in a culturally rich and strong Aboriginal family and community environment. The funding contributes to our reform of out-of-home care services and enables the continued transfer of—this is the critical part of care and case management—Aboriginal children and young people in care to Aboriginal community controlled organisations.

A recent evaluation of *Wungurilwil Gapgapduir*, when you are looking at a \$160 million investment since 2018 and \$7.174 million additional over the next two years in this budget, tells us that Aboriginal children involved with child protection and managed by an ACCO, an Aboriginal community controlled organisation, are provided culturally appropriate, trauma-informed and timely case management. Aboriginal children managed by an ACCO state they are better connected to culture, country and family, and ACCOs are increasing the number of Aboriginal children either reunited with family or in stable, culturally safe alternative care.

The 2022–23 budget also provides \$40.7 million over three years to meet growing demand for family services, but the ACCOs will deliver a dedicated proportion of that funding. So of that \$40.7 million, Aboriginal community controlled organisations will definitely have a significant proportion of that funding. That will deliver \$21.4 million in the 2022–23 budget to support families with disability as well from Aboriginal communities. So what we have there is the funding that complements—

**Mr HIBBINS:** Do you have the figure?

**Mr CARBINES:** Sorry, Mr Hibbins?

**Mr HIBBINS:** Just the figure in terms of the funding to Aboriginal community controlled organisations—do you have the exact figure in terms of what that funding amount is for initiatives in this budget?

**Mr CARBINES:** I will check with my colleagues. But I suppose what we are saying is there is the \$160 million that is *Wungurilwil Gapgapduir*. Then of the other additional funding across child protection and family services our ACCOs will have a proportion of that additional funding of \$21.4 million in 2022–23. Unless there was a specific figure that we wanted to touch on—

**Mr HIBBINS:** Can you get that on notice, if possible?

**Mr CARBINES:** Happy to, because I think also we would be able to acquit that—if not now, then at least as we have acquitted the funding we would be able to look back and provide it. But we will have a look at what we can provide further, Mr Hibbins, in relation to that, but making just that broader point that there is other additional expenditure in family services that we want to continue to drive to our Aboriginal—

**Mr HIBBINS:** Just in relation to the additional funding in this year’s budget, is there anything specifically for early intervention programs to actually prevent Aboriginal children from going in and out of out-of-home care?

**Mr CARBINES:** I suppose I would touch on some of our new investment in *Wungurilwil Gapgapduir*, particularly BP3, page 3, and some of our Aboriginal cultural support and awareness advisers, our senior cultural advisers and our innovation and learning fund, which is really about trying to drive greater work at the earlier end on how we can provide greater capacity to divert earlier and identify earlier particularly children coming into the child protection system but ultimately which kids are best placed for early help to move them across to our family preservation and support so that they are not potentially embedded, if you like, in our child protection early but that we get to them early. And part of having the innovation and learning fund and part of having our Aboriginal cultural support and awareness advisers is to help identify how we can move people quickly to culturally appropriate support, and that is part of the work that we are doing.

Lastly, I wanted to just mention that as of 30 April this year we have now got some 102 Aboriginal children who are authorised to the CEO of the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency and some 87 Aboriginal children authorised to the CEO of Bendigo and District Aboriginal Co-operative, BDAC. And so the budget is building on expanding for those Aboriginal children the Aboriginal care funded in the previous budget so that we can support more children to be under the auspice and the management of those Aboriginal controlled organisations, further delegations from the Secretary of the department. And those authorisations will be up to nearly 400 Aboriginal children and young people by 2026. This is providing, and I suppose fits in with, Aboriginal self-determination and the work we want to do. But you cannot just throw away the keys; we have got to work with them around building capacity. It is working well, and this is the track that we are on. But to hit those targets around closing the gap, we are going to need to continue with those programs.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Minister. Sorry to cut you off.

**Mr HIBBINS:** Thank you, Minister.

**The CHAIR:** The member's time has expired. Ms Richards.

**Ms RICHARDS:** Thanks, Minister and your officials, again for appearing and the work that you are doing. It is a really important sector. I would like to continue down the path that Mr Maas was on and discuss early intervention. In particular I would like to refer you to budget paper 3, page 41, and the continued investment in developing the menu of evidence-informed practices and programs on the Outcomes, Practice and Evidence Network website. I am interested in understanding what evidence-based initiatives are informing government investment and system reform.

**Mr CARBINES:** Thanks, Ms Richards. Building on some of that earlier work and investment from the government's implementation of the *Roadmap for Reform*, OPEN—the Outcomes, Practice and Evidence Network—has maintained some of the existing levels of funding for a further two years. That continuation of this program promotes activities that support an evidence-based child and family services sector.

OPEN supports innovative partnerships. We want to build local evidence and expertise that meets the needs of the service system. The continued investment in OPEN is going to maintain high-value activities to the sector, including an online portal that will have engaging tools to build capacity for monitoring, evaluation and implementation of evidence-informed practice. We will have targeted online events and forums to share knowledge and build sector capacity and capability, and there is support there for innovative and sector-led projects that address gaps in local evidence. That commitment to continue OPEN for a further two-year period will support longstanding efforts from the sector, particularly the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, and the government to progress toward an evidence-informed services system. That is where we are headed for vulnerable children and families.

Following on from our record investment—that is, the \$2.2 billion—the government continues to progress pilot programs such as Putting Families First. That program was commenced in the Melton and Brimbank area; I launched that program with Minister Hutchins recently. It is also expanding into the Goulburn region in the current months. It is a grassroots, community-driven response that aims to keep families together safely, particularly those who have had some engagement with the justice system. Now, the pilot program also allows an innovation in the child services sector to focus on holistic and whole-of-family service delivery. Putting Families First looks to support families who have been, as I said, involved in the justice system and build their skills as a family, working to keep the show on the road—keep people in capacity building to support the family, to work together, to keep families strong. Those connections to community and streamlined access to support services improve a lot of those early intervention outcomes. The government has funded initiatives that engage and support a number of organisations—Foundation House, OzChild, the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency—to provide those wraparound supports that deliver culturally appropriate care.

Just lastly on that, as the pilot continues and expands in the Goulburn region we will continue to evaluate processes and outcomes so we can embed some of those learnings and better achieve outcomes for vulnerable children and their families.

**Ms RICHARDS:** Thanks, Minister. You have spoken about improving safeguards to make sure that children in out-of-home care placements are receiving the appropriate support in a safe environment. I will refer

you to budget paper 3, page 41. I am interested in understanding what investment is being made to ensure children and young people are placed in appropriate out-of-home care arrangements.

**Mr CARBINES:** Well, the Andrews government continues to prioritise the safety and wellbeing of children in out-of-home care placements, and we are investing in streamlined access to critical information. Connect for Safety, C4S, is our national data search platform for interjurisdictional child protection services. The platform allows jurisdictions to search and match child protection information. The data platform was developed in response to the *National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children* and recommendations made by the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse on improving information sharing across sectors. Now, we know that timely access to information is crucial to enable child protection staff to gather information and undertake risk assessments. The platform will facilitate that when a report is received that identifies that a child or family has lived in another state or territory, information is gathered during a case that identifies a child or family member has lived interstate or a child or family that lives in or around a border town is believed to have moved between two states. The rollout of the program will be accompanied by a national training and support package, and that includes an e-learning module, user guide, user protocols and case scenarios and support for the child protection workforce in securing access—you need secure access of course—to critical information across our jurisdictions. We are holding some courses and there is a bit of onboarding of staff, and we expect it to continue over the commencement of the program and for that to continue through 2022.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Minister. Mr Newbury.

**Mr NEWBURY:** Thank you. Secretary, can I ask you a couple of data-related questions further to the minister's previous answers. How many children known to child protection are currently waiting for their case to be assigned to a protection worker?

**Ms SUNDERLAND:** I can answer that question—thanks for the question—in terms of a percentage. So we have got—

**Mr NEWBURY:** Thank you. Or just the number—whatever number you have with you.

**Ms SUNDERLAND:** Yes. The number I have is 13.8 per cent of children and young people awaiting allocation.

**Mr NEWBURY:** Sorry, are waiting for an allocation? And what is that as a number, that 13.8?

**Ms SUNDERLAND:** I do not have the number. I would have to do the maths on that. But it is of the total number of children that we have got at intake.

**Mr NEWBURY:** Do you have that total number with you?

**Ms SUNDERLAND:** Not with us at the moment, no. I am happy to take that on notice.

**Mr NEWBURY:** Please. Do you have a kind of rough idea—I mean, 13 of 10 or 13 of 10 000? Do you have any kind of number with you? You do not know how many children are under your remit? You have no idea of that number?

**The CHAIR:** Mr Newbury, your question has been answered, and it has been taken on notice for further clarification. I think the point is—

**Mr NEWBURY:** Well, it is extraordinary that the department does not have an idea of how many children are within its remit.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Newbury, I think you are putting words in the mouths of the department. Your question was—

**Mr NEWBURY:** Well, they just said it.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Newbury, your question—

**Mr NEWBURY:** And you have just confirmed it.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Newbury, please stop interrupting me. Your question was answered. You asked for further clarification, and the officers opposite agreed to provide that to you on notice. Could you please move on.

**Mr NEWBURY:** Thank you. Secretary, do you know how many at-risk children are currently waiting for their case to be assigned?

**Ms SUNDERLAND:** That is not a number that I would have, Mr Newbury. I can take on notice, though, the question. Sorry, I just wanted to go back to your previous question around the children under our care. There are approximately 9000 in Victoria who are under—

**Mr NEWBURY:** So it would be 13 per cent of 9000.

**Ms SUNDERLAND:** No, it would be 13 per cent of less than 9000. But at the moment we have got 9000 actually in the statutory system in some form or other—just to your earlier question about children under our care.

**Mr NEWBURY:** Yes. No, I understand.

**Ms SUNDERLAND:** But we can come back in terms of the actual allocation. What is probably important to note, though, is that those children who are awaiting allocation would still have some eyes on them to the extent that they have been risk assessed and we felt that child protection practitioners needed to be providing face-to-face visits or making sure that they were safe. So they are not awaiting allocation with no-one actually keeping eyes on them to an extent necessary.

**Mr NEWBURY:** But they just would not have a particular—

**Ms SUNDERLAND:** They would not be assigned to an actual case manager in the usual way, but they would have someone—

**Mr NEWBURY:** Who has at least met them, or there has been some—

**Ms SUNDERLAND:** Visibility of the case—yes, absolutely—and would have, at intake, taken an assessment of the initial facts of the situation and what their situation was, so that if they need—

**Mr NEWBURY:** So the intake would be done, and then it would be step 2, for want of a better expression.

**Ms SUNDERLAND:** Exactly. Yes.

**Mr NEWBURY:** Yes. Thank you. During lockdowns there was a reduction in face-to-face visits. Do you have any data on the number of visits over time, either with you or—

**Ms SUNDERLAND:** I do not have the data on the reduction in face-to-face visits. But as you note, there were face-to-face visits during that time.

**Mr NEWBURY:** Would you mind taking that notice?

**Ms SUNDERLAND:** We can take that on notice.

**Mr NEWBURY:** Thank you. Is it correct that there were two children throughout that period where direct contact was stopped who later died? There were two children. Is that correct, that two children passed away who had had direct contact with them stopped?

**Ms SUNDERLAND:** I might just ask my colleague. I can answer it in a general sense. I am very happy to—

**Mr NEWBURY:** Please. Yes, whoever it is. Sorry, if it is Ms Toomey, then please—

**Ms TOOMEY:** Mr Newbury, are you referring to the commissioner for children and young people's report, where there was a report that there were two children that died during that period?

**Mr NEWBURY:** Yes.

**Ms TOOMEY:** I think from memory, Mr Newbury, the commissioner referred to both child protection and also the community services system having reduced visits for those children.

**Mr NEWBURY:** Yes.

**Ms TOOMEY:** So I am certainly familiar with the reported case—

**Mr NEWBURY:** Yes. I guess the reason I am asking is: have all at-risk children known to child protection now had face-to-face visits?

**Ms TOOMEY:** Just going back to your earlier question in relation to those waiting, we certainly prioritise access and prioritise visits according to available workforce and according to the risk rating, the risk assessment, of all children coming through. So all children are assessed through intake, then they proceed through to the investigation phase, and then once—

**Mr NEWBURY:** So not all known at-risk children have received face-to-face visits?

**Ms TOOMEY:** All children that we have assessed as having an immediate risk we have certainly prioritised for visits, and the performance measure is in fact two days—

**Mr NEWBURY:** That the visit may not have occurred is all I was asking. Okay.

**Ms TOOMEY:** We visit all at-risk children within two days.

**Mr NEWBURY:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Ms Taylor.

**Ms TAYLOR:** Thank you, Minister and officials, for being here today. I was wanting to hear a bit—for the benefit of the committee, actually—about the carers help desk, so if can refer you to budget paper 3, page 41, and if you could provide some detail about the introduction of the carers help desk, that would be really, really helpful.

**Mr CARBINES:** Thanks, Ms Taylor. I am pleased to provide a broader context around the carer help desk, a significant initiative in the budget this year. We are enormously grateful to carers, who continue to provide loving environments to our children and young people in out-of-home care, and without them these vulnerable children and young people cannot receive the safe care that they need when they need it most. Kinship care accounts for something like 75 per cent of out-of-home care placements excluding permanent care placements, and it is the fastest growing type of out-of-home placement. Kinship care is of course our preferred option for children as they can no longer live with their parent. It delivers greater stability. It keeps children connected to family, community and culture.

Living with extended family or close friends is not always an option, and that is when invaluable foster carers come in, accounting for some 18 per cent of home-based care, with roughly 1000 foster care households in Victoria. We know that care can be challenging, and we continue to engage with our carer community to understand firsthand the caregiving experience, the challenges they are facing and the system challenges and to support them to provide the best environment possible to help the children and young people in their care thrive. So the 2022–23 budget, as I said before, does invest some \$5.8 million in the design and implantation of the new carer help desk, and that is to provide better support to carers and remove barriers to accessing some of the documentation that is critical to anyone in managing our life administration: Medicare card numbers, birth certificates and passports. The help desk is going to complement the carer peak helplines that provide emotional support to carers, but it is unable to practically assist on matters that require departmental delegations in many cases.

This is something that the carer community and their advocacy groups have been calling for, and we have heard them. We launched in 2019, in October, *Strong Carers, Stronger Children*—the details, of course, in that Victorian strategy—to better support kinship, foster and permanent carers and to drive improved outcomes for children and young people in care, and it is through this strategy and its commitment to improving the supports and systems available to carers that the government is able to engage with carers in the sector and deliver a budget outcome that responds to identified needs.

**Ms TAYLOR:** Very good. And how will the implementation of the carer help desk provide greater support for carers with children and young people in their care?

**Mr CARBINES:** Thanks, Ms Taylor. The design implementation of the carer help desk is going to provide much-needed carer support for the acquisition of a range of essential documents and services for young people, as I touched on just before. Not only is the \$5.8 million carer help desk a budget initiative that will provide support to children and carers overcoming barriers to accessing information, but it should reduce the administrative burden on the child protection workforce, allowing them to do the role they do best, so providing essential risk assessments and interventions to support vulnerable children and young people.

The help desk will be a dedicated team that undertakes placement-related care support tasks to free up our child protection practitioners to focus on the risk and safety assessments and to progress case plans, so the help desk team will assist foster and kinship carers with a number of care support processes, such as obtaining those essential identity documents. We have all been there. These things are tedious at times and take time that has got to be squared away, and it can be fatiguing for many of our carers. We want to provide direct advice and assistance to them, because if they are prioritised it is going to make their caring commitments easier and better supported, and we have heard that message. Some of the other things—like assistance to organise COVID vaccinations, My Health Records for children in care, supporting school and childcare enrolment, supporting access to cultural and community activities—are the sorts of priorities where we can improve the carer experience and the outcomes for those they care for.

The establishment of that help desk is going to provide a more streamlined and efficient response and greater consistency of support that will assist with navigating what is complex and time consuming and administrative. Life is complicated, and if we can provide greater support and assistance here and alleviate some of that burden that falls on our child protection practitioners, that will engage and allow them to focus on the critical risk and safety work they need to do. So it is part of that comprehensive work we need to do. It has been called for by our carers and the sector, and we look forward to working with the Foster Care Association of Victoria, Kinship Carers Victoria and our department on the design and implementation of the service so that it absolutely meets what is required here and the expectations of our carers and their peak bodies and organisations.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Minister. Sorry to cut you off. Mrs McArthur.

**Mrs McARTHUR:** Thank you, Chair. Secretary, government expenditure and taxpayers money is about outcomes. Clearly your outcomes have been substandard. We have just heard about the increase in poor standards. The commissioner for children and young people has said she repeatedly raised concerns about the impact of the pandemic on vulnerable children and young people as services withdrew. Why were her warnings not heeded?

**Ms SUNDERLAND:** Thank you for the question. I think I just have to probably correct the question a little bit in the sense that I think those concerns were heeded and I think the department did take very seriously its obligations during that time to vulnerable children. So absolutely, the child protection workforce continued to operate. In the same way that paramedics and nurses and doctors operated, so too did the child protection workforce, and I do sort of just want to acknowledge them for that. I think what the department did do, and it is relevant to the point around the reports to child protection during that time—there are other ways that we become aware of vulnerable children and families. That can be through community partners and through our other networks at the local level, and for that reason there was investment in the family preservation and reunification program at that time—quite significant investment—which has been continued as recurrent funding. That really did step in for those families and work around immediate need with other mainstream services to address that vulnerability. So there were really practical things that the department did at that point to address some of that vulnerability that we were seeing across the community.

**Mrs McARTHUR:** Okay. A spokesman for the department said:

... Victoria's child protection workers have continued to deliver essential child protection services to support children and families throughout the pandemic—this has never stopped.

But it did stop, didn't it, as the past two years have seen the highest number of deaths of children known to child protection since 2011. What would you say?

**Ms SUNDERLAND:** What I would say: I mean, obviously any child death weighs very heavily on us and our staff, so I just have to acknowledge that and the grief that people still will be feeling about those deaths—every single one of them. I think what is important, though, is just to clarify that the child protection system did keep operating. I think you said there that it had in fact stopped; it did not stop. Reports were still being received; investigations were still being conducted. The department worked very hard with police, health, education and other departments and community sector orgs to continue service provision during that time. I can take you through what we—

**Mrs McARTHUR:** So no child was left in a vulnerable situation during this time?

**Ms SUNDERLAND:** Absolutely the department would have been doing everything they could, based on the information they had. Obviously—

**Mrs McARTHUR:** But you were not doing face-to-face visits, were you?

**Ms SUNDERLAND:** They were doing face-to-face visits.

**Mr CARBINES:** No, they were.

**Mrs McARTHUR:** They were?

**Ms SUNDERLAND:** Absolutely. That is right, yes—face-to-face-visits during that time. There were also other initiatives set up, like after-hours additional capacity. So on the weekends, particularly at high-risk periods with high-risk families, there were extra resources put into the system so that there could be connection with those hard-to-reach and particularly vulnerable families during that COVID period.

**Mrs McARTHUR:** Budget paper 3, page 3, going to the Aboriginal family services and child protection sector: according to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, one in 10 Indigenous children is in care, the worst rate in the country. What is not working to produce this result?

**Ms SUNDERLAND:** Obviously that number concerns us greatly. The over-representation of Aboriginal children in care is something of real concern. I think what is probably important to recognise there is that the Aboriginal children in care in Victoria are mostly placed with family, so while that child may not be living with biological parents and in the family home, we are far above the national average in terms of placing with kin, so with relatives, with aunts, with cousins, with the broader network of family. So while we would never want to see children removed from their family home, the one benefit of the system we have created in Victoria is that they are being placed with family, and we are, as I said, above the national average in terms of that.

**Mrs McARTHUR:** The recent Commission for Children and Young People annual report found there had been a disproportionate increase in deaths of Aboriginal children in recent years, including 13 of the 45 deaths last year. In 2022 how is this tolerable?

**Ms SUNDERLAND:** No child death is ever tolerable. That is absolutely not what we would be saying. I can take you through what we know, the breakdown of those child deaths.

**Mrs McARTHUR:** But how has it happened?

**Ms SUNDERLAND:** Some of them are accidental, some of them are from natural causes—there are SIDS deaths included in that data. I can take you through the breakdown if that is helpful for you, but—

**Mrs McARTHUR:** Great. Give it to us on notice; that will be terrific.

**Ms SUNDERLAND:** Sure, of course.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Mrs McArthur. Mr Richardson.

**Mr RICHARDSON:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Minister and department representatives, for joining us today. Minister, I want to take you to the important topic of the child protection workforce, and I refer you to budget paper 3 at page 38. For the committee's benefit, are you able to explain how the Victorian budget 2022–23

investments will ensure we support child protection workers with manageable caseloads to deliver support to our vulnerable kids and young people and their families?

**Mr CARBINES:** Thanks, Mr Richardson. As referenced in my presentation earlier, the Andrews Labor government has made some unprecedented commitments to adding to the frontline workforce, and since 2014 we have funded some additional 1180 child protection practitioners to keep Victorian children safe. Our child protection workers are the people we rely on to ensure care and support is provided to our most vulnerable children and young people and their families. When reports are made about families in crisis it is this workforce that we turn to to protect these children and to promote a safe family environment and keep families together when we can. And when keeping families together is not possible—when they cannot do that—we are making sure those children are cared for and supported in care arrangements and given the best opportunity to thrive. It does not happen without a dedicated child protection workforce who work tirelessly for positive outcomes.

The Victorian government funds child protection to accept reports of child abuse, undertake protective investigations, case plan where abuse is substantiated and provide case management of children who have been assessed to be in need of protection subject to Children's Court orders, including those requiring state care. This year's budget includes funds of \$10.4 million over three years to strengthen the community services workforce. It will fund a new advertising campaign aimed at attracting additional child protection practitioners to continue and support improved case allocation rates and manageable workloads. The campaign will be looking to attract new practitioners to support our existing workforce. Particularly as we recover and reopen and move ahead from the COVID-19 environment, that investment will look to recommence the recruitment of child protection workers from overseas and will support visa and relocation costs. It will also continue and expand the career advancement program to support and promote child protection workers to move into more senior roles supporting a stronger and more experienced workforce. Some of those initiatives remove barriers to entry to the community services workforce and increase the pipeline and the diversity in community services. It means more children will have dedicated workers who can spend more meaningful time with the children and families allocated to them.

We have already seen the benefit of some of that investment in additional child protection practitioners. The case allocation rate has increased from 81.5 per cent in 2014 to over 86 per cent in April this year. That shows that even though the number of children in child protection has increased—due in part to population increases but also because there are more professionals who are obliged, under changes made in this Parliament to the law, to make mandatory reports if they know children are in those circumstances—we continue to support our child protection workforce to allocate more cases to individual practitioners. I think it is very important to note that case allocation rate, which has increased. The trend has well and truly increased from 81.5 per cent to 86 per cent. So we need to build on that investment and recognise that our child protection workforce is fundamental to supporting our most at-risk children and young people and that workforce and those workers need our support to deliver that critical care. I commend them for getting out there and working every day throughout the pandemic to support children at risk and keep them safe.

**Mr RICHARDSON:** And just finally, in the minute I have got, you spoke about attracting workforce and people into this important sector. What recruitment strategies have been undertaken to support the workforce to meet the demand for child protection services?

**Mr CARBINES:** Well, following that significant, considerable investment in 2020–21 and 2021–22 we continue to look at ways to recruit in the child and family services sector. As we know, through the government's significant investment right across the human services workforce, the human services sector has seen great opportunities for people to work in human and health services and has presented some challenges around how we can continue to provide great opportunities to recruit people, but there is a lot more choice for people and Victorians around the contributions and work that they can contribute to in the human services and health sector workforce. So those campaigns, we know one of them is to build on our Go Where You're Needed recruitment campaign, which includes providing incentives for workers to work in regional Victoria, and we know meeting demand for child and family services in those regions is a priority as more people choose to go and live in rural and regional Victoria because it is a great place to be. It is further supported by an upcoming recruitment campaign with some \$10.4 million that has been announced to attract more workers to the community services sector and our jobs that matter campaign.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Minister. Mr Barton.

**Mr BARTON:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Minister. I refer to budget paper 3, page 200, and the number of children in foster and kinship care. Soon we will be considering a bill in the Legislative Council that includes extending the age of when children can stay with their foster and kinship carers. Can you provide some more information about extending the age of care?

**Mr CARBINES:** Yes. Thanks, Mr Barton. If I could really just go to some of the work that we are doing there around providing better support to young people transitioning from care to independence, particularly I think we know that care leavers are more likely to experience unemployment, homelessness and poor physical and mental health, and they are more likely to be involved in the criminal justice system. So the Better Futures program supports young people leaving care services to achieve independence and seeks to provide them with the supports that will help them achieve their transition goals. For example, between 1 November 2019, when Better Futures rolled out statewide, and 30 April this year, some 1750 young people were supported by Better Futures. Evidence from international jurisdictions shows that a more gradual and supported transition from care leads to better outcomes for care leavers across many areas of their life. Part of the Better Futures model and the landmark Home Stretch program—and I commend my predecessor for his leadership and work in delivering on that program—provide eligible young people with extended care through casework support, flexible funding and an accommodation or care allowance until they reach 21 years of age. We all remember that at 18 things do not just stop, and for people who rely on our care system in particular we need to make sure that the support and efforts that have been put into getting them ready as young adults continue for that bit longer. I know through the ministerial advisory group with young people that we engaged that were involved in it, they provided a lot of great feedback on this program.

The Victorian government invested some \$75 million over four years and ongoing in the 2020–21 budget to ensure that all Victorian care leavers are provided with support as they transition to adulthood. That funding includes \$64.7 million to expand the Home Stretch program for all children in foster, kinship and residential care from 1 January last year, and from 1 July 2021 young people from 16 years of age due to leave care became eligible for Home Stretch support until their 21st birthday. That funding includes \$10.3 million over four years and ongoing funding for the Better Futures program, so that will provide young people with a range of tailored supports and help them to prepare for life after care in areas of education, employment, housing, health and wellbeing and some of those community connections. It is also continuing the commitment to care leavers.

In June 2021 the Victorian government invested a further \$39 million over four years and \$13.8 million ongoing via the 2021–22 state budget so that young people subject to permanent care orders are supported via Better Futures from 15 years and nine months and Home Stretch from 18 years up until 21. Young people accessing Home Stretch are able to remain with their foster carer, their kinship carer or their permanent carer. They are supported by an allowance, casework and flexible funding, and for those leaving residential care there is a transition to other housing options in private rental supported by an allowance, casework and flexible funding. Home Stretch flexible funding is available to facilitate a young person's goals for independence, including practical supports, so driving lessons and getting a licence; support to stay in school; obtaining further qualifications after leaving school; employment support, so getting a resume sorted, purchasing the clothes or the tools of the trade; health supports to encourage regular health and dental checks; and wellbeing support such as a gym membership.

As of March 2022—barely a couple of months ago—more than 714 young people had been supported by Home Stretch across the state. So in addition to Better Futures and Home Stretch the Compass program, which is Australia's largest social impact bond, is also assisting by providing care leavers some two years access to housing and a support worker to navigate their future and help them access education, training and employment, and other services based on their needs. Thanks, Mr Barton.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Mr Barton. That concludes the time we have set aside for the consideration of the child protection portfolio with you today.

We thank you for appearing before the committee in this capacity. The committee will follow up on any questions taken on notice in writing, and responses will be required within five working days of the committee's request.

The committee will now take a short break before moving to consideration of the disability, ageing and carers portfolio with you.

I declare this hearing adjourned.

**Witnesses withdrew.**