

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the 2022-23 Budget Estimates

Melbourne—Monday, 23 May 2022

MEMBERS

Ms Lizzie Blandthorn—Chair

Mr Danny O'Brien—Deputy Chair

Mr Rodney Barton

Mr Sam Hibbins

Mr Gary Maas

Mrs Beverley McArthur

Mr James Newbury

Ms Pauline Richards

Mr Tim Richardson

Ms Nina Taylor

WITNESSES

Ms Ingrid Stitt MLC, Minister for Workplace Safety, and

Ms Rebecca Falkingham, Secretary, Department of Justice and Community Safety;

Mr Colin Radford, Chief Executive Officer, WorkSafe Victoria; and

Mr Simon Phemister, Secretary, and

Ms Lisa Buckingham, Deputy Secretary, Jobs Victoria, Secure Work and Inclusion, Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions.

The CHAIR: In the absence of having a lot of voice, I am just going to hand to the Deputy Chair.

Mr D O'BRIEN: I declare open this hearing of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee.

I ask that mobile telephones please be turned to silent.

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

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

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

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

I welcome the Minister for Workplace Safety, as well as officers from the departments. Minister, I invite you to make an opening statement of 5 minutes. This will be followed by questions from the committee.

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

Visual presentation.

Ms STITT: Coming home safe from work each and every day is a fundamental right. That is why workplace safety is such a priority for this government. While we know the majority of employers comply with their occupational health and safety obligations, WorkSafe inspectors continue to play an important role as Victoria's independent workplace safety regulator.

This financial year, up to April 2022, WorkSafe inspectors have conducted more than 35 000 visits and inquiries and have issued more than 7800 improvement notices. In this time, WorkSafe has also received more than 143 000 calls to its advisory line. WorkSafe's online guidance has been an invaluable resource, with more than 9 million visits to the website. I would like to thank our WorkSafe inspectors and also our hardworking workplace health and safety representatives for the important role they play in making our workplaces and industries safer.

When someone is injured at work, WorkCover is key to ensuring injured workers get the support they need. Between July 2021 and April 2022 WorkSafe received more than 23 500 new workers compensation claims. We know it is vital that workers are being properly supported in their recovery and return-to-work journey, with targeted support that takes into consideration their individual circumstances. More than 12 800 injured workers have been assisted back to work between July 2021 and April 2022.

We are continuing to deliver on our workplace safety commitments aimed to protect Victorian workers and prevent serious workplace incidents from occurring. Since 1 July 2021 to 30 April 2022 more than 4500 workers accessed mental health support much sooner through our provisional payment scheme.

In May 2021 legislation was amended to provide for a new arbitration function within the Accident Compensation and Conciliation Service to give injured workers choice and avoid the need to go to court. We are developing psychological regulations that put psychological hazards on the same footing as physical ones, recognising that they can be just as harmful.

We are continuing to lead the nation on silica reform through our silica action plan; improving compensation arrangements for workers with silicosis and similar occupational diseases; and Australia's first licensing regime for engineered stone, which will come into effect in November. We are also delivering on establishing our new lived experience Workplace Incidents Consultative Committee. The Andrews Labor government also continues to drive key reforms and raise awareness to ensure better outcomes for workers.

In 2021 WorkSafe published its first mental health strategy and one-year action plan, which includes action items to prevent gendered violence and sexual harassment. WorkSafe's targeted 5000 program ensures that resources are focused on workplaces where the worst injuries and fatalities are predicted to occur to address risks before they result in harm to workers, and throughout this year WorkSafe ran a number of important public awareness campaigns aimed at work-related sexual violence, sexual harassment, safety in agriculture, culturally and linguistically diverse workers and young workers.

Victorians who work in casual or other insecure jobs will no longer be forced to choose between a day's pay and looking after their health, thanks to the Victorian sick pay guarantee. This Australian-first initiative, supported by the Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions, was launched on 14 March this year and provides our most vulnerable workers the safety net they need to take time off when they are sick or need to care for loved ones. This year's budget provides \$245.7 million to support the sick pay guarantee. Eligible casual and contract workers in certain occupations can apply for up to five days a year of sick and carers pay at the national minimum wage, and it is anticipated that more than 150 000 workers are eligible in phase 1. I am proud of the work and the reforms our government continues to deliver to ensure every workplace is safe and that we continue to get the message out there that no matter where you work there is no excuse for failing to protect workers. Thank you, Chair.

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

Mr D O'BRIEN: Thank you, Chair. Minister, can I just seek clarification: is the Victorian sick pay guarantee the only element of your portfolio that is administered by DJPR?

Ms STITT: Yes, that is right.

Mr D O'BRIEN: That is correct?

Ms STITT: Yes.

Mr D O'BRIEN: That is why the Secretary is here for this particular issue. Can I ask, then, to the other Secretary, Ms Falkingham: budget paper 3, page 282, has the output summary for the department. What specifically does workplace safety fall under, and what is the output budget for the current financial year and next financial year?

Ms FALKINGHAM: Sorry. Do you mean, Mr O'Brien, the total amount in the department? Is that what you are asking?

Mr D O'BRIEN: Sorry, I missed that.

Ms FALKINGHAM: Sorry. Are you asking how much? I am not following your question, I am sorry.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Well, there is the 'Output summary by departmental objectives'. Where does workplace safety come under, and what is the total budget for the portfolio?

Ms FALKINGHAM: The total budget obviously is not set out in the budget, as you are aware. Those items are reported in the annual report for WorkSafe.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Okay. Where does workplace safety fit into your output summary by departmental objectives?

Ms FALKINGHAM: I will have to take that on notice for you, Mr O'Brien, because those fall under the workplace safety annual report.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Okay.

Ms STITT: Can I just add, though, Mr O'Brien, that obviously the Department of Justice and Community Safety supports me as the Minister for Workplace Safety, but WorkSafe is the independent statutory occupational health and safety regulator and workers compensations insurer, so it is just a little different—

Mr D O'BRIEN: Yes, but you have still got a portfolio. There is a portfolio, so I just wanted to know where it is under. There has got to be money provided to the portfolio.

Ms STITT: Well, as the Secretary has indicated, WorkSafe's annual report provides the details—

Mr D O'BRIEN: Anyway, the Secretary has taken it on notice, Minister. I will—

Ms FALKINGHAM: Okay. Just to be really clear, Mr O'Brien, there are no performance measures, because as I said, they all fall under the WorkSafe scheme, which is reported in their annual report.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Okay. Mr Radford, can I ask you a question? The prosecution of the Department of Health's mismanagement of the hotel quarantine program—where is that up to at the moment?

Mr RADFORD: That is before the courts.

Mr D O'BRIEN: So when did it go to court? It was scheduled for 22 October—

Mr RADFORD: There was an initial mention hearing some months ago, but we do not manage the timetable of the prosecution. That is now a matter for the court.

Mr D O'BRIEN: No, no, I understand that. So just for the committee's benefit, when you say it is before the courts—charges have been laid?

Mr RADFORD: Yes.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Is the Department of Health contesting those charges?

Mr RADFORD: I am not aware of that. I am not aware either way.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Well, you are making the prosecution. Presumably you know if it has gone to court already.

Mr RADFORD: No, I am not making the prosecution, Mr O'Brien. WorkSafe is making the prosecution—

Mr D O'BRIEN: Well, sorry, Mr Radford, you are here representing WorkSafe.

Mr RADFORD: Yes, but that matter is now in the hands of the court, and the court will schedule and timetable when that matter progresses. It is not a matter for us.

Mr D O'BRIEN: And I am trying to get an update. Surely as the CEO of WorkSafe you are following this fairly high profile prosecution.

Mr RADFORD: I am not aware of the Department of Health's position.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Has it been to court?

Mr RADFORD: Has what been to court?

Mr D O'BRIEN: Has the case been to court—the prosecution?

Mr RADFORD: Sorry, there has been an initial mention hearing where they set the timetabling—

Mr D O'BRIEN: Right.

Mr RADFORD: but I am not aware of the position that the Department of Health is going to take. I think you would have to ask the Department of Health that.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Well, I understand that, but you are running the prosecution. Can I ask: did the investigation consider the role of any individuals, including the Premier or any ministers involved?

Mr RADFORD: I am not going to go into the detail of a matter that is before the court.

The CHAIR: And Mr O'Brien, I would remind you that we are here to discuss the estimates process.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Well, it is a fairly significant prosecution that WorkSafe has been involved in, and we have asked questions about this time and time again. I think it is only fair for the promotion of accountability to the Victorian people that we actually ask some more questions on this. There has been no explanation from WorkSafe as to why 800 people can die and a department gets charged but no individual gets charged.

The CHAIR: Mr O'Brien, you are right that we have considered these issues but primarily in the context of other inquiries, and this inquiry relates to the budget estimates for the coming financial year. If you could please keep your questions to that. But unfortunately your time has expired. Mr Maas.

Mr MAAS: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Minister, and thank you, team, for your attendance this morning. Minister, I would like to go to the sick pay guarantee. Budget paper 3 at page 73 outlines some \$245.7 million across the forward estimates. I would just like you to tell us a bit more about the sick pay guarantee and about the pilot program and just outline where this idea came from.

Ms STITT: Thank you. I would be really pleased to do that. This is obviously a really important issue, something that the global pandemic really shone a light on. It really kind of exposed the fault lines in our economy and in our labour market, and none more so than the impacts of insecure work in a circumstance where you are dealing with a once-in-100-year health emergency.

The sick pay guarantee is the first of its kind. It is a pilot program. It will seek to address one aspect of insecure work, and that is the lack of sick pay and carers leave pay when a casual or insecure worker has to take time off work when they are unwell. For many workers who are in casual and insecure employment, they do not have the financial means to support themselves when they are forced to take time off when they are sick. Often it is a terrible choice between missing out on money for groceries, for rent, for other life essentials or going to work sick. Now, none of this is their fault. Through no fault of their own they find themselves in these sorts of employment arrangements that mean that they just do not have the financial capacity to absorb losing a whole day's pay. So the government took the view that it was incredibly unfair that people were continuing to be put in this position, so we have acted on that aspect of insecure work. We know that many casual workers work in some of the lowest paid industries in our country. They are not able to absorb the cost of taking time off either when they are sick or if they have a family member that they have got caring responsibilities for. I think it is important to highlight that almost one in four hospitality workers, one in six sales assistants and one in seven cleaners and laundry workers actually live below the poverty line. So we do not think that workers should have to make that impossible choice. This is really about taking some of the learnings out of the pandemic through some of the temporary measures that we had in place to support workers when they were having to test and isolate and giving them that safety net of sick pay available in the event that there are sick.

This scheme allows casual employees and contractors who are unwell to stay at home and to apply for up to five days a year of sick pay at the national minimum wage. We think that this will really make an enormous difference to not only those workers who need to stay home and recover and look after their own health or that of their sick dependent, but this scheme will have some benefits for employers as well.

Mr MAAS: Great. Thanks, Minister.

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

Mr HIBBINS: Thank you, Chair. On budget paper 3, page 91, I want to ask about ‘Decriminalising the sex work industry’. I understand there is an initiative to set up a sex work safety team. Are you able to give me any indication of what the progress on that is or what the time line is?

Ms STITT: Yes, certainly. Thanks, Mr Hibbins. The budget includes \$5.283 million over two years that will be provided to WorkSafe to support the very important work that they will take on in terms of the decriminalisation of sex work reform that our government is pursuing. So \$1.4 million will go towards WorkSafe to project manage implementation of the reform package, and \$978 000 will go to managing compensation claims for eligible sex workers injured at work. That money will also go towards some training for WorkSafe staff as they adapt to having to work quite closely with a community of workers that they probably do not have terribly much exposure to currently. It is to develop and publish that really important guidance for the industry about the decriminalisation of sex work, but more importantly the occupational health and safety obligations of duty holders for this industry, and to educate and raise awareness of workers rights as well as employer obligations. As you would be aware, Mr Hibbins, the real centrepiece of this reform is legitimising sex work as legitimate work but also recognising that no matter what industry you work in in our state you deserve to be safe at work. So I am actually really proud that we have pursued this reform and that we will also be tooling up WorkSafe to be able to provide really important support to workers and duty holders in the sex work industry.

Mr HIBBINS: What is the time line for the establishment of that team?

Ms STITT: The reform has a number of different key time lines. Stage 1 commenced on 10 May this year, so that was really the decriminalisation of street-based sex work in most locations and the repeal of a number of different Acts, including the public health offences in the *Sex Work Act* and the repeal of those industry-specific advertising controls, and it also commenced the new anti-discrimination protections in the *Equal Opportunity Act*. Stage 2 will start in December 2023, and that is when the *Sex Work Act* will be repealed and the transition to regulating sex work will kind of go to mainstream government regulators including WorkSafe in respect to occupational health and safety and workers compensation arrangements. Obviously there is a bit of work to be done before that December 2023 date, so that is why we have included that money in this year’s budget so that WorkSafe can get ready for those key dates and be in a position to be able to support the industry.

Mr HIBBINS: Thanks, Minister. Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Hibbins. Ms Richards.

Ms RICHARDS: Thanks, Minister and officials, again for your time this morning. I would like to continue to explore the sick pay guarantee, using the same budget paper reference as Mr Maas, budget paper 3, page 73, and perhaps explore it just a little bit further. Can you provide some detail about how the pilot will operate and how it will assist workers?

Ms STITT: Thank you. The sick pay guarantee, as I was in the guts of discussing with Mr Maas, is a two-year pilot. The program will be administered by the Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions, and essentially workers who are sick or need to care for a loved one will be able to access the sick pay guarantee via Service Victoria. To register for the sick pay guarantee via Service Victoria workers do need to meet several criteria which have been established to ensure that the scheme is providing support to those workers who need it the most. There are some eligibility criteria, of course. You need to be 15 years or over. You need to be a casual employee or a self-employed person with no other employee, such as a sole trader or an independent contractor. You cannot be entitled to paid personal, sick or carers leave in any of your jobs. It is, interestingly and not surprisingly, a feature of casual work in our country that a large proportion of casual workers have a second job in order to make ends meet, but if one of those jobs provides them with a sick or carers leave entitlement then they would not be eligible for the sick pay guarantee. They need to work physically in Victoria, regardless of where they live; so their employment must be Victorian based. They need to have the right to work in Australia, they need to work in one of the eligible occupations or industries and, on average, they need to work at least 7.6 hours per week in an eligible occupation.

Once a worker is registered, they can then go on to make a claim for sick pay or carers pay for any period in which they would have been provided paid work if not for illness or for caring responsibilities. So a worker is able to claim up to five days or 38 hours in any year for themselves or for a family member who is unwell. Once the claim is approved the sick pay guarantee payment is made directly into the nominated bank account

of that individual worker. At any point in the process workers can access assistance through the sick pay guarantee contact centre, which has been set up for help either with registering or if they have questions about their eligibility or a particular claim that they are following up on; that contact centre support is available. We are also supporting workers through a dedicated pilot participant support program. The participant support program will assist workers to access legal advice and assistance via a referral and the complaints line and the contact support line that I have already mentioned, and we are also including education programs to ensure workers are aware of their rights and employers are clear about their obligations as well.

I am really proud that we have designed a program that is all about supporting some of the most insecure. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. Mr Newbury.

Mr NEWBURY: Thank you. Mr Radford, just to finish up on Mr O'Brien's questioning before, I appreciate in relation to the hotel quarantine legal matters what you will not go into, but one thing that I think is a fair and reasonable question is: do you have any data on point in time costs—any cost?

Mr RADFORD: I would have to take that on notice, Mr Newbury.

Mr NEWBURY: Can you take that on notice?

Mr RADFORD: Yes, I will.

Mr NEWBURY: So whatever point in time you can provide; I appreciate it is ongoing. Just a point in time, whenever that is—just an update on costs. That would be great, thank you.

Mr Phemister, this might be a question for you. In relation to the slides, we saw that there was a \$245 million cost in relation to the sick pay guarantee. Have you got any data on the cost of establishing the scheme—so out of that money how much it is costing to establish—and then any information on the ongoing costs as a breakdown?

Mr PHEMISTER: For the 2021–22 year, Mr Newbury, I can take on notice. That is the \$32.9 million. For the ongoing administration costs, which are marginal, that is split between ourselves and our colleagues over at Service Victoria, but I am happy to take that on notice and get that back to you.

Mr NEWBURY: Thank you. Also, if I can ask, I noticed on the slide the referral to 150 000 people. Have you got any modelling around the anticipated payments to employees—like, how much someone will get?

Mr PHEMISTER: As in the dollar amount?

Mr NEWBURY: Yes.

Mr PHEMISTER: We have.

Ms BUCKINGHAM: Hi.

Mr NEWBURY: Hi.

Ms BUCKINGHAM: The scheme is costed to be able to pay the 150 000 people up to five days sick pay or carers pay per annum, so that is how you arrive at the \$246 million. So it has been modelled.

Mr NEWBURY: So is it their standard rate of pay?

Ms STITT: It is the minimum wage, Mr Newbury.

Mr NEWBURY: Oh, the minimum wage. Okay.

Ms STITT: \$20.33 an hour.

Mr NEWBURY: Terrific. Thank you. Mr Phemister, are you responsible for the Accident Compensation Conciliation Service? Is that Ms Falkingham?

Ms STITT: No, that sits with workplace safety.

Mr NEWBURY: Okay. I just had a couple of questions on that, if you do not mind. It might be a Secretary question, but Minister, please—

Ms STITT: Sure.

Mr NEWBURY: Will employers be able to appear before hearings?

Ms STITT: Are you talking about the—

Mr NEWBURY: The conciliation service.

Ms STITT: The arbitration or conciliation? Because the conciliation service has existed for many years, but we have legislated to provide an arbitration function as an alternative to going to court. So you are talking about those—

Mr NEWBURY: Yes.

Ms STITT: Yes, okay. Well, the scheme has not yet commenced, but the ministerial guidelines do provide the ability for employers to self-represent at those hearings.

Mr NEWBURY: Okay. Thank you. Will training or upskilling be offered to insurers under the new arrangement?

Ms STITT: For agents, are you referring to? I might have to defer to the Secretary on that question, if that is okay.

Mr NEWBURY: Please. Fine. No worries.

Ms FALKINGHAM: We are working our way through that, Mr Newbury. That is an issue that has come up and we have heard really clearly right across stakeholders. So we will be in a position to announce details of that later in the year.

Mr NEWBURY: Would you mind just taking it on notice if there is anything else that you wanted to add in relation to the answer as you work it through?

Ms FALKINGHAM: Yes, of course.

Mr NEWBURY: Please feel free to take that on notice.

Ms FALKINGHAM: No problem.

Mr NEWBURY: Minister, regarding the Workers Compensation Independent Review Service—

Ms STITT: Yes.

Mr NEWBURY: will that scheme be continuing or not?

Ms STITT: There have been some discussions occurring. Mr Radford is probably best placed to give you—

Mr NEWBURY: Could he take that on notice? I have got 2 seconds left. Would you mind taking that on notice?

Mr RADFORD: Sure. Will do.

Mr NEWBURY: Thank you so much.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Newbury. Ms Taylor.

Ms TAYLOR: Yes. I would just like to explore the sick pay guarantee pilot a little further. We know that casual and contract workers form a significant part of Victoria's workforce, so can you please detail which workers will be eligible under this pilot?

Ms STITT: Certainly. Thank you, Ms Taylor. In terms of the occupations covered, almost one in five Victorians are casual. Of course that figure grows when you factor in other forms of insecure employment, such as independent contractors, sole traders and the like, so we are talking about a significant proportion of the Victorian workforce. So it was very important to carefully target the occupations that would form part of the first phase of the program. That includes some of the most insecure industries and occupations in Victoria. It includes hospitality workers. It includes food trades workers and preparation assistants. It includes supermarket and supply chain workers. It includes retail and sales assistants, aged and disability care workers, personal care workers, which is another industry where we have a very high proportion of casual and insecure employment, cleaners and laundry workers and of course security guards.

Occupations were determined not only following the public consultation process but in consultation with employer associations, unions and community organisations. What we found was during the consultation process we had over 1000 individual submissions to that process, which I think is quite significant. Many people were very interested in this issue and wanting to have their say. Seventy-one per cent of those who made a submission had no access to sick or carers pay. I think it is evident from both the consultation and the data that females are over-represented in casual and insecure employment, and that is something that of course many of us have been aware of for many years. Seventy-one per cent were female respondents, which is consistent with that much higher proportion of women in insecure employment, and 20 per cent of the respondents identified themselves as being from culturally and linguistically diverse communities.

So I think it is going to be incredibly important that we focus in on some of those communities that are perhaps traditionally much harder to reach. They might not be tapped into mainstream communications channels. They might be much more easily reached through CALD media or CALD community groups, so we are trying to do a lot of work with other government departments that have deep engagement with CALD communities. That is something that I know the team at DJPR are very committed to seeing through. Overwhelmingly workers who participated in the consultation agreed that this was incredibly significant in terms of their ability to manage their finances, making ends meet, and also would have a positive impact on their wellbeing.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. Mrs McArthur.

Mrs McARTHUR: Thank you, Chair. Minister, in discussing the sick pay guarantee in your presentation you mentioned this is phase 1.

Ms STITT: Yes.

Mrs McARTHUR: What do you mean by this? Is phase 2 the expansion of the eligibility under the scheme to all casual workers in the first two years?

Ms STITT: Thank you, Mrs McArthur. Phase 1 was the occupations that we determined had the higher attributes, if you like, of insecure and casual employment and the highest proportion of those. Now, we have said all along that we are open to seeing whether there are additional industries and occupations that have similarly high incidence of casualisation and insecure work arrangements—that we may look, in the course of the two-year pilot, to see whether there are any additional occupations or industries that we might add.

Mrs McARTHUR: So it could be expanded to all casual workers?

Ms STITT: I would think that that would be highly unlikely. There are over a million casual and insecure workers in our state, Mrs McArthur, and this is a very targeted pilot—deliberately so—over a two-year period because what we want to be able to do is actually assess how the pilot operates, what the success of the pilot is in terms of addressing the levels of financial insecurity amongst those workers. But also I am really very seriously committed to seeing what the benefits are for employers, and there will be benefits for employers, I am sure, both in the area—

Mrs McARTHUR: I am glad you mentioned employers, Minister—

Ms STITT: If I could just finish on this point, Mrs McArthur. There are employers who already provide this kind of benefit to their workers, and they have been quite actively engaging in the consultation process around the pilot. I am really keen to see whether there are benefits for retention of skilled staff. We know that coming out of the pandemic there are a number of industries—

Mrs McARTHUR: Okay. Thank you, Minister. We do not need 4 minutes of—

Ms STITT: including some of those industries that are part of the pilot, who have skills shortages at the moment. Providing this kind of security and benefit to those workers could have a very positive impact on retention and save employers money in retraining and recruitment costs.

Mrs McARTHUR: Thank you, Minister. Can you rule out imposing a tax or a levy to finance the scheme in two years time when the funding runs out?

Ms STITT: Mrs McArthur, we have been very clear about this being a two-year pilot, and nothing in relation to what happens post the two-year pilot is determined or settled, but what I have given a clear commitment about to employer associations, to unions and to community organisations who work with a lot of these vulnerable workers is that I will consult very closely with them about not only the two-year pilot but what occurs at the end of the pilot. None of that has been settled and it would all be subject to that vigorous evaluation process, and it would be subject to the outcomes of the trial, which I think you would expect of us. This is really all about doing something innovative and new to address a particular aspect of insecure employment in our labour market. It is all about protecting workers financially when they are in a position where they cannot—

Mrs McARTHUR: Would they have to supply a medical certificate, Minister, as proof of illness for two days?

The CHAIR: Sorry, Mrs McArthur, your time has expired. I will pass the call to Mr Richardson.

Mr RICHARDSON: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Minister and department officials, for joining us this morning. I want to take you to the topic of silicosis, Minister, a topic that you have worked substantially on and are passionate about the support of. I refer to the reference in your presentation where you mentioned the support for workers who have been impacted, and I am wondering, for the committee's benefit, if you could provide an update on how the government is supporting Victorians with this devastating disease and how this interacts with the Victorian budget.

Ms STITT: Thank you, Mr Richardson. This is a really important area of work, and it is just a dreadful debilitating lung disease, silicosis. It has a devastating impact on workers who contract this disease, and of course it has a devastating impact on their families. It is particularly prevalent within the stonemason, construction, mining and quarrying industries, and it is caused by breathing in tiny particles of silica dust, which can cause irreparable scarring on the lungs. It really is our modern-day equivalent of asbestosis, and we are absolutely single-minded about doing everything we can to stop workers contracting this deadly disease. Sadly, however, in 2021 WorkSafe accepted 73 claims from workers who had developed silica-related diseases as a result of workplace exposure, and tragically we lost five workers last year as a result of silica-related lung disease. We delivered the silica action plan in 2019, and since then we have continued to make what I believe are nation-leading reforms in this area both to prevent workers from contracting silica-related diseases and also by providing better support for those who have sadly already contracted a deadly silica-related disease.

In November last year the amended regulations commenced. These are incredibly important and aim to eliminate those adverse health outcomes for those workers who work with materials containing crystalline silica. The regulations introduced an Australian-first licensing scheme for businesses working with engineered stone. The regulations will be introduced in phases, and that is to ensure that duty holders clearly understand their obligations in this area and have time to prepare for those obligations. But from November this year employers who work with engineered stone must have a licence, and from this time suppliers of engineered stone will not be able to supply any business who is not licensed. That is a very important change that we are making. Because we know of the dangers of dry cutting engineered stone using power tools, the regulation makes permanent our ban on uncontrolled dry cutting, and this will really significantly, I hope, cut down on workers' exposure to crystalline silica and reduce the chances of them developing a silica-related disease. This reform also adds further regulatory oversight to high-risk work involving crystalline silica across all industries, not just engineered stone, and this includes, obviously, the construction industry and the earth resources industry.

Mr RICHARDSON: Thank you, Minister.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Thank you, Minister. Mr Barton.

Mr BARTON: Thank you, Deputy Chair. Minister, too many families have to suffer the devastating consequences of having a loved one injured or killed while doing their job. We know more needs to be done to help families deal with this resulting trauma and the upheaval of these tragedies. What has your government allocated in the budget to assist families of workers who are injured or have died in their workplace?

Ms STITT: Thank you for your question, Mr Barton. Of course one death of a worker is one too many, and we are absolutely committed to doing whatever we can to make sure that every worker is safe in their workplace and returns home to their loved ones. I do want to take the opportunity to acknowledge the family members and loved ones who have lost a loved one at work in the last 12 months. I cannot imagine how difficult that would be, and as I said, every workplace death is a tragedy.

In March last year we amended the *Accident Compensation Act* and also the *Workplace Injury Rehabilitation and Compensation Act*. These amendments commence on 1 July this year, and that will make a difference to families of deceased workers in the form of increased entitlements for them and support to them. From 1 July, when a worker dies as a result of a work-related injury their family will continue receiving household help services for six months, and this change will provide that much-needed support to families when they need it the most, when they are going through just a terrible, traumatic time in their lives.

We have also made changes to entitlements for overseas funeral costs, and I think it is an important change because it acknowledges that many of our workers in Victoria were born overseas or they have loved ones overseas. It means that the costs incurred outside of Australia that relate to funeral, burial, cremation or repatriation of a deceased worker's body can be compensated and family members who live overseas can be supported to attend funeral services in Australia.

We have also continued the \$10 million families and injured workers system reform and implementation package. That really is about making sure that those supports are in place for families who lose somebody at work, and I can advise that last year WorkSafe implemented the new bereavement support service to provide support to families and workers who have been affected by a serious workplace incident. I am really grateful for that work because it is on top of the work that WorkSafe does with the Victorian family liaison officers, and they coordinate a tailored approach for families that are in this circumstance. There are seven family liaison officers within WorkSafe.

It is really important, I think, that the supports that we give to the families of workers who have tragically died at work align with the support that we give other victims of traumatic events, including victims of crime, so we have really worked hard to try to build that package of support. I am incredibly grateful to the workplace incidents consultative committee for their invaluable insights and suggestions in this area of reform.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. That concludes the time we have set aside for consideration of the estimates with you today, and thank you for appearing before the committee, as well as your officers. The committee will follow up on any questions taken on notice in writing, and responses will be required within five working days.

The committee will now take a 15-minute break before resuming consideration with Minister Tierney.

I declare this hearing adjourned.

Witnesses withdrew.

WITNESSES

Ms Gayle Tierney MLC, Minister for Training and Skills and Minister for Higher Education,

Ms Jenny Atta PSM, Secretary,

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

Ms Lill Healy, Deputy Secretary, Higher Education and Skills,

Dr Xavier Csar, Chief Executive Officer, Office of TAFE Coordination and Delivery,

Dr Simon Booth, Executive Director, Policy and Strategy Division,

Mr Craig Robertson, Chief Executive Officer, Victorian Skills Authority, and

Mr Cameron Baker, Executive Director, Apprenticeships Victoria, Department of Education and Training.

The CHAIR: I declare open these hearings of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee. Because my voice sounds clearly terrible, I will hand to the Deputy Chair. Thank you.

Mr D O'BRIEN: 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 Training and Skills and Minister for Higher Education as well as officers from the department. Minister, I invite you to make an opening statement presentation of 10 minutes. This will be followed by questions from the committee.

Ms TIERNEY: Thank you, Deputy Chair and committee members. Good morning, everyone. I also wish to acknowledge the traditional owners of the lands on which we are meeting here today, the Wurundjeri people, and I pay my deepest respects to their elders both past and present and to emerging leaders and to all elders and Aboriginal people joining us.

I would also like to acknowledge the commitment of the entire post-school training skills and education sector during what has been yet another difficult year.

Visual presentation.

Ms TIERNEY: When this government was elected we promised to rebuild the vocational education system. Our aim was to create a strong system that was fair, accessible, relevant and easy to navigate for all Victorians. Seven and a half years later, I am proud of what we have achieved. The Victorian government's \$3.2 billion investment in TAFE training and skills since 2015 has achieved strong and future-focused outcomes, which are highlighted here on the slide that is before you. This government's investment in training and skills has laid the foundations for a world-class system, with TAFE as the anchor. This time line offers an overview of the major reforms we have initiated, focusing on quality, integrity and connecting the sector. It demonstrates our cohesive approach, culminating in the provision of skills and training and major initiatives, such as free TAFE and Apprenticeships Victoria, which have changed lives and are building a stronger future for Victoria.

Since 2020 we have reset the training and skills system so it delivers the pipeline of skilled workers that the government and industry needs. The VET sector has supported the people hit hardest by the pandemic by providing better access to training and pathways to a good job and a great career. From the North East Link to the Footscray Hospital to South West TAFE's Warrnambool library and learning hub, skilled people trained at TAFEs are rebuilding our state.

As you would have heard from Minister Stitt earlier this morning, we also have TAFE-trained early childhood educators delivering our nation-leading kindergarten reforms and VET graduates caring for people with disabilities, nursing the elderly and growing our food. Free TAFE has removed financial barriers for school leavers and people who want to retrain, upskill or re-enter the workforce. Apprenticeships Victoria is matching apprentices and trainees with the industries and training providers that are right for them. Our Learn Locals are working with communities and industries to ensure that the skills needed are delivered at a local level. And the Victorian Skills Authority is driving a united approach that will benefit the training and skills system across Victoria. And of course the Office of TAFE Coordination and Delivery, OTCD, is driving best-practice collaboration across the TAFE network. I am proud that these key responses to the Macklin review are being realised and are driving change and excellence now and into the future.

Free TAFE is a centrepiece of our reforms. Free TAFE started with 48 courses in 2019, and now there are more than 60 to choose from. It has saved students more than \$240 million in tuition fees since it was introduced, and it has been helping more than 100 000 people access the education and training they deserve. That includes over 16 000 people enrolled in diploma of nursing, over 3500 people enrolled in certificate IV in mental health and over 7500 people enrolled in certificate IV in cybersecurity. Free TAFE has trained people who are an important part of the workforce in delivering the government's Big Build and social services reform. As this diagram shows, free TAFE has increased access to training for women, people with a disability, unemployed people, regional Victorians and our multicultural communities. Free TAFE has been an absolute game changer.

Inclusion, equity, industry alignment and stronger training opportunities to preserve Victoria's Aboriginal heritage define this budget. We are investing another \$103.1 million so that more Victorians can get training for the jobs that they want while giving employers the skilled workers they need to grow their businesses.

As we continue to transform TAFE into a world-class skills and training and vocational education network, we have also introduced a new funding model for 2022 and 2023, as shown here. This budget includes over \$83 million to support a coordinated TAFE system, including more than \$66 million to support the new TAFE funding model, which will boost the delivery of critical training; over \$11 million to strengthen the Office of TAFE Coordination and Delivery; and more than \$5 million to increase work placements for TAFE students.

This budget has a core focus on improving access and engagement for people living with disability. Firstly, I am proud of our commitment to support the capacity of the Deaf and hard-of-hearing community. That is why we are investing more than \$4 million to add the diploma of Auslan and the advanced diploma of interpreting to the free TAFE list. This great inclusion on the free TAFE list will not only broaden how many people can learn Auslan, it will also address a strong workforce demand for Auslan interpreters. I am also pleased that we are investing almost \$800 000 for an access audit of the TAFE network to ensure our TAFEs are welcoming and accessible for people of all abilities.

Our government invested over \$31 million in the Marrung Aboriginal education plan in the last budget. Across TAFE and training, this included over \$6.5 million to support the expansion of Koori liaison and Koori student support officers and the inclusion of the new certificate II and III in learning an Australian First Nations language. This budget invests a further \$2.8 million to deliver a new certificate IV in teaching an Australian First Nations language. I am proud that TAFE is playing a lead role in delivering these courses that are so important on a cultural and educational level.

This government understands and values the importance of apprenticeships and traineeships. They provide strong industry pathways that lead to jobs and qualifications that are a career passport for life. Apprenticeships Victoria continues to break down barriers and support people to gain apprenticeships working on some of the state's biggest projects. It is driving great learn-and-earn career opportunities for so many Victorians. And as you can see from this slide, there has been a strong increase in people taking up apprenticeships and traineeships, and we are here to help them succeed. That is why this budget also includes \$12 million for the apprenticeship support officers program. Apprenticeship support officers are very important in assisting people

to transition from trainee into a fully qualified apprentice. They are a great resource, and they are a great resource to employers as well.

Another great initiative has been the establishment of the Victorian Skills Authority. In less than 12 months the authority has done so much to bring together the sector. Whether it be industries, employers, unions or communities, everyone has had a lot of engagement with the VSA. The authority's first major task is to develop the Victorian skills plan, and after extensive consultation the authority is analysing all of the research and data before finalising its first skills plan. The skills plan will provide vital insights into where occupations are in demand across Melbourne and of course regional Victoria.

Chair and Deputy Chair, I do thank you for the opportunity to present to you today. As you can see, this government has really done some heavy lifting in the post-school training and skills sector. It has transformed into a high-quality, inclusive and relevant system that responds to the needs of the Victorian economy and the people that drive it, and this budget furthers our commitment to Victoria having a world-class training and skills system that will benefit Victoria now and into the future. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. Mr Newbury.

Mr NEWBURY: Thank you. Minister, how is the government supporting industries in the often-overlooked sectors like floor laying and carpentry?

Ms TIERNEY: In terms of the industry sector, we have an industry engagement architecture that is very active, and it falls within the umbrella of the VSA. The VSA has had a lot of engagement with a whole range of industries, just generally, but more so in terms of where there are particular issues. An industry can go to the VSA, provide the data, the evidence about the issue that they might have, the shortages that they might be seeing, and they can sit down with the VSA and work through those issues, and we are seeing that time and time again. I am very pleased to have Craig Robertson, who is the CEO of the Victorian Skills Authority, with us today, who I am sure would like to add to your engagement program with industry query.

Mr NEWBURY: Thank you. I guess my question was in relation to the often-overlooked sectors or occupations and what the government is doing in relation to that. I mean, I mentioned floor layers but boilermakers, fitters and turners et cetera—what specifically is the government doing in relation to those often-overlooked sectors?

Mr ROBERTSON: Thank you for your question. I am Craig Robertson, the Chief Executive Officer of the Victorian Skills Authority. As the Minister was saying, the prime purpose of the VSA is to reach out and connect, primarily across all industries, to get a handle on what are those particular occupations that are in demand and that are sometimes overlooked. The findings from the Macklin review that give rise to the establishment of the VSA found that the previous model had, sometimes, providers competing against each other and dropping out courses that were vital to industry but were not necessarily important to those providers, and collectively those important courses were overlooked. For example, saw technicians are vital of course at the front end of the supply chain, but it is very difficult to get training for those saw technicians. And believe it or not, if we lose that skill, we lose the skill long term. So the approach of the VSA is to engage through our pre-existing 10 industry advisory groups, who represent most industry sectors in Victoria, and to get a very clear view from them about what skills are in demand and then look at what should be the training response to be able to make sure those skills are really continued on into the future, particularly where they are important for industries now that are all looking to grow, post disruption.

Mr NEWBURY: Thank you. If I can pick up a point that you were raising, to either yourself or the minister: in terms of skills and training, how many TAFEs are implementing micro-credentialled courses?

Ms TIERNEY: I think, Mr Newbury, the best person to possibly answer this is Dr Booth.

Mr NEWBURY: Oh, thank you. Sorry.

Ms TIERNEY: In terms of skill sets, a lot of work has been done over the last 18 months.

Mr NEWBURY: Yes. It was a genuine question, I can assure you.

Ms TIERNEY: Yes, yes. No, I take that. Dr Booth?

Dr BOOTH: Thank you, Minister. The Victorian government has a funded skill sets list, which includes a broad range of, effectively, accredited micro-credentials. In 2021 we had a bit over 10 000 commencements on that list. There has been a significant growth in activities. If you look back to the levels of activity in those short forms of accredited training, back a couple of years, we have seen growth of over 100 per cent. Now, I do not have the breakdown of, by TAFE, who is doing what in front of me, but we have seen—

Mr NEWBURY: Would you mind taking that on notice if possible?

Dr BOOTH: Yes, I will check if that data is available. But as I say, we have got over 10 000 skill set commencements in the last year. They have all been validated through industry engagement processes, and I suppose just to make what I think is an important point for the committee: we have been very careful to test which short courses the government will fund and provide advice on that with industry to ensure there are meaningful and genuine employment opportunities at the end of it. So we have got an approach there which is really about validating and leveraging—making sure we have got strong quality assurance mechanisms wrapped around those skill sets to ensure that students are getting good outcomes, it is genuinely meeting employer need and the providers are going about it in the right way.

Mr NEWBURY: I guess perhaps this is more of a broader ministerial question: noting that there is a chronic skills shortage in a number of industries, is the government appropriately matching the need for that type of microtraining in those sections to fill those shortages that currently exist? That is, is there more opportunity perhaps to tone what we are doing to make sure some of those chronic skills shortages are better met?

Ms TIERNEY: Yes, look, I think there is plenty of opportunity. We have taken up some of it, and it is active in terms of the VSA's interaction with their industry engagement program. The Victorian skills plan I would suspect will also highlight opportunities. In respect to the overall view of skill sets or micro-credentials I think there are a number of things that we just need to be quite mindful about. One is that we do not want to see the return of bad behaviour, but we do need to have accreditation so that industry themselves recognise and understand what that part of study included and how relevant it is for their business. So it needs to talk a language back to the industry as well as the student; I think that is really important. The other thing is that there needs to be, I think, a breakdown in the way that we approach micro-credentials and skill sets. There are a lot of skill sets that can be done that are more entry level into employment which would be fairly short courses—very short courses—that just enable people to be more job ready. Then of course there are skill sets that can build towards the broader qualification, and then there will be skill sets or micro-credentials that might be needed where there is a gap in skill for someone who was fully qualified but their industry has moved on. Technology of course is a driving motivator in all of that. So I think it is a matter of making sure that we have those very genuine, deep conversations with industry to work out exactly what they need in various levels and where it fits in terms of upskilling and job-ready and stackable micro-credentials.

Mr NEWBURY: Thank you, Minister.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. Mr Maas.

Mr MAAS: Thanks, Chair. Thank you, Minister, and thank you to your team for their appearance this morning. Minister, if I could take you to budget paper 3 outcomes, particularly pages 157 through to 160, I was hoping you could take the committee through the outcomes that have been achieved in the BP3 measures for training and skills.

Ms TIERNEY: Thank you. The outcomes show that when you essentially invest in TAFE and the training system and when you back TAFE in you can deliver an outstanding training system. The outcomes in the BP3 measures are a clear testament to that, and I think that what the TAFE system in particular has done, and the VET system more generally, is an amazing job, particularly given how they worked through the pandemic. Again a big shout-out to everyone in the skills and training sector. I mean, they were able to continue through, make that transition in terms of online training, reach out, make those phone calls and take those emails of students who might have needed that extra bit of guidance and also to check in on their health and wellbeing. I must say I truly appreciate exactly what they have done, so I am absolutely proud of the vast majority of BP3 measures that have been exceeded—actually exceeded. Whether it be the higher student enrolments, including strong enrolments in regional Victoria, the student satisfaction with their VET or the improved employment

status, we can be incredibly proud of how Victoria's TAFE and training system is delivering for the workforce and of course for the Victorian economy.

Now, in relation to the specific BP3 measures, we have exceeded the outcomes in the following areas: the 'Number of government subsidised course enrolments', the 'Number of government subsidised course enrolments in the TAFE Network', the 'Number of government subsidised apprenticeship course enrolments', the 'Proportion of government subsidised enrolments related to qualifications that will lead to jobs and economic growth', the 'Number of government subsidised course enrolments by students living in regional Victoria', the 'Number of students without Year 12, or Certificate II or above, enrolled in a government subsidised course at Certificate III or above', the 'Number of enrolments in the Free TAFE for priority courses initiative', the 'Proportion of VET completers who are satisfied with their training', the 'Proportion of VET completers with an improved employment status after training', the 'Proportion of VET completers who achieved their main reason for training' and the 'Six-year completion rate for apprentice commencements in government subsidised AQF qualifications', so I think that demonstrates the great work that people have been involved in, because these are seriously great outcomes.

I want to particularly focus on the important progress that we have made in the apprenticeships space. We have set up Apprenticeships Victoria. That was towards the end of 2021, and we wanted to increase the number of apprentices and trainees in study and completing their course. It has been just over a year, and we have already seen their work starting to seriously pay off. With the NCVET report, the latest one which takes us to September last year through the previous 12 months, there was a 100.5 per cent increase in the number of apprentices and trainees in Victoria, and Victoria was leading the charge. We are the pacesetter in terms of the number of apprenticeship commencements in this country. Again, I think a lot of good work has been done, and it is paying off for a whole lot of younger people but also people that are taking on apprenticeships later in life to have a career change. We are actively signing up students. Apprenticeships Victoria is connecting apprentices with support services, particularly if they are having challenges, and of course that commitment, the \$12 million in the ASOs, will also help to provide that wraparound service that many young people in particular that are transitioning from cert II into the apprenticeship system really need for a variety of reasons.

But I might actually call on Cameron Baker, because I note Cameron is the head of Apprenticeships Victoria and is probably in the best situation to give us more of an update on exactly the work of Apprenticeships Victoria and what we are doing in that space.

Mr MAAS: Sure. Thank you.

Mr BAKER: Thank you, Minister. Thank you, committee. In relation to the establishment of Apprenticeships Victoria, it was part of the 2020–21 budget cycle, so we are now fully established at 271 Collins Street in our metropolitan office. Our first regional office will come online in the second half of this year in Warrnambool. The minister has already mentioned that we have \$12 million of continuing funding for the apprenticeship support officer program. That actually services 28 apprenticeship support officers across the entire state. We have some dedicated support too for group training organisations.

Mr MAAS: Terrific. Thank you.

Ms TIERNEY: Thanks, Cameron.

Mr MAAS: A supplementary question on that: how have previous budget initiatives contributed to the outcomes in the BP3 measures?

Ms TIERNEY: Thank you, Mr Maas, for that question. It is an important one because strong outcomes do not just happen by accident, do they? We know that consistent investment and the consistent investment in our TAFEs and our training system are paying off. We just cannot say, 'Well, here's a budget, and this is what it's all about'. No. It has been eight years of solid investment in the TAFE and training system, and this year's budget is a continuation of that trajectory. In terms of lifting VET students, this has been a long time coming. We do know what happened before we came to government—from 2010 to 2014 we saw a decline of almost 100 000 students attending TAFE. Students were not wanting to study VET because—I dare say it, and let us just call it out—the reputation of TAFE had been severely damaged. We came in on an election commitment to save TAFE, and we did that, but we also cleaned out a lot of the bad behaviour that was being performed by a range of private providers. We introduced free TAFE, and we are making significant investments in things like

TAFE campuses, equipment and teachers. People are now proud, I put to you, really proud to be studying vocational training, and TAFE students are really proud to be on TAFE campuses. TAFE enrolments now are higher than in our first year of government.

The CHAIR: Sorry to interrupt you there, Minister, but the member's time has expired. I will pass the call to Mr Barton.

Mr MAAS: Thanks, Minister.

Mr BARTON: Thank you, Chair. Minister, good morning.

Ms TIERNEY: Good morning.

Mr BARTON: I refer to your presentation, in which you outlined a \$3.2 billion investment in Victoria's training system, which includes the establishment of the Victorian Skills Authority. How is the Victorian Skills Authority engaging with the transport industry, and what are the specific skill needs that the Victorian Skills Authority is identifying for the vehicle industry, including the commercial passenger vehicle industry?

Ms TIERNEY: Thank you, Mr Barton, for your question. I am very much aware that the transport/vehicle industry has had a number of communications with the VSA. And in fact on reflection I think it is a demonstration of exactly why the VSA is there, and we can only get better at it. This is particularly in relation to the commercial passenger vehicle issue, is that correct?

Mr BARTON: Yes.

Ms TIERNEY: Yes. I know that the Victorian Skills Authority was originally set up of course to tackle the challenges that industries have, particularly those that are complex and require industry to come together. Whether it be employers, unions, community members, we want all of them having a say and describing exactly what their issues are. The VSA will continue to drive industry engagement through the industry engagement framework, a framework developed originally by the Victorian skills commissioner and the advisory group for the transport industry. The VSA engages with the transport and logistics industry advisory group under this framework, so there is a specific peak advisory group there, which I know that you are more than aware of. The VSA has been engaging not just with the IAG as such. My understanding is that it has also brought in two organisations representing the rideshare sector but also that there are two taxi operators representing. One is a large national provider, and the other is a large regional provider. I am assuming that you well and truly know about that.

We believe that this is an ongoing issue that requires a lot of work, but we believe that we will not just be able to deal with this issue that you raise but we will be able to unblock and unlock a whole range of skills that are the right skills for the issue that is presenting itself. Some of them are new issues, or they are old issues that no-one has really dealt with before. I think that we will be able to deal with the particular issue that you raise; it is being dealt with. I am going to ask Craig Robertson, the CEO of the VSA, to provide advice on the specific skill needs that he understands are needed in the transport industry, Mr Barton, if that is okay.

Mr BARTON: Thank you.

Mr ROBERTSON: Thank you, Minister. In respect of commercial passenger vehicle drivers, we have engaged with a number of industry representatives, as the minister was indicating. Some of those companies already do training for new and returning drivers, but there do appear to be some gaps. So we are engaging both with the industry and the Office of TAFE Coordination and Delivery, because there are some units of competency in the national register that would be appropriate for passenger vehicle drivers.

In respect of the broader transport and logistics industry, as you can imagine, there is real demand for drivers, because during the periods of disruption due to COVID lockdowns we have all in many shapes and sizes relied upon transport to bring goods and services to the household. So there has been increased demand for that, and as consumption returns to the economy, you can imagine that long-haul or truck drivers are in high demand as well. Our research is indicating that demand, and that will form part of our advice into the Victorian skills plan to say, 'What is it that the system can do to encourage skilling in that area?'. But at the same time there is transition taking place, and we would all understand that. There are electric vehicles, hydrogen-powered

vehicles and the like, and there is more technology involved in mass transport. So it is no longer enough to say, 'Let's teach somebody safe driving'; it is safe driving and the ability to use technology. They are some of the challenges that are facing the sector. The idea of the skills plan is to frame those to engage with the industry sector to get a real sense of the priority skills that are required, because often it is a balance between the relative strengths of those skills in a training program, and that would be provided to the department to think through how that can be facilitated.

Mr BARTON: Can I just go back to the commercial passenger vehicle sector, because certainly within the industry itself there is an acknowledgement that the training is very patchy between some groups and other groups and all that—there is no consistency through there. Are you considering possibly a TAFE course to train the trainers or to train individuals or moving to something down those lines? Because quite frankly at the moment it is probably worse than pre the reforms of 2017.

Mr ROBERTSON: That is the case. Our investigation has shown that there obviously are some units that are relevant in that area. As I was mentioning, some companies do have a training program. What we are doing is investigating—

Mr BARTON: But where are the standards set, then? They can have a training program, but if they say, 'Have a cup of coffee and tick these boxes', that is hardly a training program.

Mr ROBERTSON: What we are investigating through the Office of TAFE Coordination and Delivery, along with several TAFEs, is developing some of those bespoke courses to really lead the way, because as consumers we all want to feel safe in a car, and we can do a lot of things by providing that training and leading the way through the TAFE course.

Mr BARTON: Yes. Well, it has certainly got to be safe, that is first—safe for the drivers, and training about driver fatigue and all those sorts of things. Thirteen seconds—I will leave it at that. Thank you.

Dr BOOTH: Could I add one other—

Ms TIERNEY: Go on.

Dr BOOTH: Sorry, Minister. It in fact follows on from the other question too: we have a workforce skill set pilot program, which is in place really for exactly this sort of situation. Where there is a need to bundle existing units of competency in a new way or also to work with industry and develop new units of competency at a high-quality standard, that can be delivered consistently; there is a set of funds available to do that.

Ms TIERNEY: Yes. And can I just add too—

The CHAIR: Sorry. The member's time has expired. I will pass the call to Ms Richards.

Ms RICHARDS: Thank you, Minister and departmental officials, for your time today and the work that you do. I would like to explore Aboriginal languages, Minister, and I will take you to budget paper 3, pages 3 and 5. I am interested in perhaps understanding what the funding for Aboriginal languages in the budget is going to deliver.

Ms TIERNEY: Great. Thank you, Ms Richards, for your question. The funding for revitalising Aboriginal languages here in Victoria has been one of the things that I have been proudest of, I have got to say, as Minister for Training and Skills. Look, we cannot change the past, but we can take steps to now try and right the wrongs. An important part of that is to save and revitalise Aboriginal languages. In this year's budget we are investing \$2.9 million to support the delivery of a certificate IV in teaching a First Nations language. This course will be delivered at TAFE. The funding this year builds on funding from last year's budget where we provided funding for the delivery of certificates II and III in learning a First Nations language. The certificates II and III are very much focused on learning Aboriginal languages, and it is not just one language that is taught. Students in the courses generally learn their own traditional language, and that obviously varies. The certificate IV allows graduates to apply for permission to teach through the Victorian Institute of Teaching. This professionalises the workforce and recognises the individual skill through formal recognition and access to appropriate salaries.

It is all about revitalising Aboriginal languages, but it is also about pride in culture, and it is about teaching non-Aboriginal students about Aboriginal history and language. It is such a great initiative and something that this government is incredibly proud of—to have worked with Lionel Bamblett and the VAEAI and other organisations.

In terms of the specifics of the funding itself, the funding goes towards developing the curriculum for the course and providing students with scholarships to complete the course. But I will hand it over to Deputy Secretary Healy, from the department, to go into more of the specifics of the funding that is associated with this great initiative.

Ms HEALY: Thanks, Minister. This course was developed with the Tauondi Aboriginal college in South Australia with our department here; with the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association, VAEAI, which the minister mentioned; and also with the Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages, and was designed to be able to be tailored in states but with that national perspective. Here in Victoria the investment made by the government through the budget—\$100 000 of that is focused on paying for licensing of the course here in Victoria. Three hundred thousand dollars will be used to contextualise the course as well as develop course materials, again relevant to the situation here in Victoria. And then \$300 000 will be used to then conduct the course, initially starting with one course at the beginning of 2023 and catering for up to about 20 students, and we anticipate then there will be two more courses each year thereafter. And then the final amount of the funding, \$300 000, is around an evaluation, and we think 2024 and 2026 are the points of evaluation for this new initiative. Thanks, Minister.

Ms RICHARDS: Thanks, Minister. I understand that prior to committing to this funding there was a pilot into the initiative, so I am interested in exploring how successful that pilot was.

Ms TIERNEY: Thank you. I have been very interested in it as well. Can I say that I was afforded the real privilege of sitting down and talking to Corrina Eccles, who is an Indigenous leader in and around the Geelong region. She is also on the board of the Geelong TAFE and a very good contributor, and she does a lot of the welcome to country ceremonies in our region as well. She was part of the pilot program, and we were able to sit down—Corrina and I, and Chris Couzens—and she was able to explain to us exactly what happened in the pilot program, what the learnings are and what needs to be incorporated into the certificate IV to make it even better than what we were envisaging already. So I thank her for that and her ongoing leadership. She is actually employed at Moolap Primary School, which is on the Geelong–Portarlinton road as you head out of Geelong. It is just amazing. If you walk through the gates of that school and hear the kids talking language, it is absolutely amazing. I have been to a preschool where people have sung the Australian anthem in a different language and a First Nations language, but to actually see it as an ongoing way of communicating in the classroom but also in the playground is just seriously amazing.

We are really pleased with the outcomes of that pilot, obviously pleased enough to sit down and develop a certificate IV. It will mean that there will be a serious career path and a serious profession attached to First Nations language. We believe that the funding of these three qualifications will also reinforce our government's commitment to inclusion and equity so that everyone can participate and build strength and confidence and culture. So yes, it has been very well received, and we are very, very happy to be playing our part in it.

Ms RICHARDS: That is lovely. Thanks, Minister. I noticed in this year's funding the Victorian government is going to deliver on the Marrung strategy. I am interested perhaps in understanding a little bit more about that.

Ms TIERNEY: The Marrung plan and strategy has been developed for some time, and we build on it and it is updated on a regular basis, and that ensures that we have got a strategy and a plan and a program in terms of the whole education journey that an Aboriginal kid, a First Nations kid, will have. And of course we have, as I said, in the last budget made a contribution of close to \$31 million in respect to that, and part of that in the area I look after, training and skills, was I think \$6.5 million for Koori liaison officers. As you know, in each TAFE now we have got Koori cultural centres so that Koori kids can actually have the support that they need to continue their studies and get the necessary information that they need within their own culture. I think—

The CHAIR: Sorry to cut you off there, Minister. The member's time has expired. I will just pass the call to Mrs McArthur.

Mrs McARTHUR: Thank you, Chair. My question is for Mr Baker, Executive Director of Apprenticeships Victoria. On apprenticeships, Mr Baker, the apprenticeship support officers program will receive funding of \$5.9 million in 2022–23 and \$6.1 million in 2023–24. How many support officers will that employ?

Mr BAKER: Mrs McArthur, that carries forward the funding for 28 apprenticeship support officers. We have one apprenticeship support officer dedicated to the Big Build apprenticeship program, which is funded through that program. So that sustains the funding for 28 apprenticeship support officers.

Mrs McARTHUR: Okay, thank you. How will you evaluate the success of the officers and the program, and what improvement in completion rates do you expect with that \$12 million worth of funding?

Mr BAKER: The program has an evaluation built into the budget implementation approach, so we will be evaluating the program close to its conclusion from that two-year funding program. We have introduced compulsory professional development processes for the group of 28. So we have standardised the ASO offering, and that enables us to benchmark performance across the ASOs as well.

Mrs McARTHUR: Okay, good. You need \$12 million to do it. So perhaps you could continue on. What are the completion rates for Indigenous people?

Mr BAKER: I do not have that information to hand, Mrs McArthur.

Mrs McARTHUR: Could you take it on notice?

Mr BAKER: Yes.

Dr BOOTH: We will see if it is available.

Mrs McARTHUR: You are indicating that they may not be available, the completion rates?

Dr BOOTH: No, we certainly have completion rates, as of course you will be aware, in the performance statement. But it just depends how that data can be disaggregated. So that is what I will need to get some technical advice on.

Mrs McARTHUR: Okay, so if you would like to take that on notice, and while you are at it perhaps you can give us the completion rates for women in trade apprenticeships. You will take that on notice too?

Ms TIERNEY: May I just add to that—

Mr D O'BRIEN: Sorry, could I just ask you to say yes for the record rather than just nod.

Dr BOOTH: I am so sorry. Again I will need to go and assess the extent to which we can disaggregate this data, but subject to that data being able to be disaggregated, absolutely.

Mrs McARTHUR: Well, we are going to invest in \$12 million worth of officers to ensure that there are completion rates, so surely you must know what completion rates you currently have.

Dr BOOTH: Yes, sorry. So as you will note on budget paper 3, the six-year completion rate for apprentices is 62.8 per cent, which is—

Mrs McARTHUR: So can we have that completion rate split by industry—how many women completing trade apprenticeships in plumbing versus electrical, for example?

Dr BOOTH: So to return to my earlier answer, subject to that being technically feasible it is something the department can look at. I do not have that department here, and I will need to get advice from the data team on how that data can be disaggregated.

Mrs McARTHUR: So what specific programs at TAFE and industry level, excluding mandates, have you implemented to improve the take-up of apprenticeships for women?

Ms TIERNEY: Sorry, can I answer this? There are currently 10 projects that are underway, because we do know—and everyone knows—that in terms of women in non-traditional trades the level, outside of catering and hairdressing, is low, and that has been the case for some time. So we have made a deliberate attempt to provide a number of projects that are being done in a variety of areas. I will give you a couple, Mrs McArthur: accelerating women in auto, partnering with the Victorian Automotive Chamber of Commerce; WAVE, women in electrical, partnering with the ETU; Women in Plumbing, partnering with Master Plumbers;

CareersPlus, partnering with Tradeswomen Australia, and I think everyone knows Tradeswomen Australia—they are pretty active across the country as well as in Victoria; Women in STEM, partnering with Ai Group; the Sprinks female-specific apprenticeship pathways, partnering with the National Fire Industry Association; Women and Their Trade, partnering with the National Electrical and Communications Association, NECA; the women-only multitrade preapprenticeship, partnering with Apprenticeship Employment Network; and also there is another program called Women on Track, partnering with Downer, for the rail industry. And can I take this opportunity, if anyone is slightly interested in this area, to encourage people to encourage young girls and women into these areas. The more that we can have, the more that we will have equity.

Mrs McARTHUR: Perhaps we do not need advertisements, Minister.

Ms TIERNEY: It is not advertisements about equity and the importance of ensuring that women have their rightful place in all industries.

Mrs McARTHUR: Okay. Well, thank you, Minister. We note that the two-year completion rates are less than 50 per cent and that target completion rates are also less than 50 per cent. Why do you aim so low?

Ms TIERNEY: We do not aim low at all.

Mrs McARTHUR: Well, you achieve low.

Ms TIERNEY: Excuse me. You did ask a question; I am attempting to answer. In relation to completion rates, they have historically been low. We are building up that, and you can see that in terms of the BP3 measures. But one can lose sight that in terms of completion rates of a university bachelors degree, Mrs McArthur, we are on par. We are on par. So why—

Mrs McARTHUR: Good. Excellent. What are the completion rates for people with a disability?

Ms TIERNEY: I do not have that level of detail with me.

Mrs McARTHUR: Could you take it on notice?

Dr BOOTH: I can answer some of these questions actually. I have just been able to get some data together. That two-year completion rate—the measure in the budget is people who either complete in the year they started or in the following year. Often there are a number of courses that continue on beyond that. But for people with a disability, 44 per cent will complete it in less than two years.

Mrs McARTHUR: So below 50 per cent.

Dr BOOTH: But, as the minister was saying and referring to before, over 19 per cent of students are also continuing on beyond that. And a number—

Mrs McARTHUR: Yes. Well, we look forward to the figures on women and Indigenous people.

The CHAIR: Sorry to interrupt, Mrs McArthur and Dr Booth. The member's time has expired. Ms Taylor.

Ms TAYLOR: Thank you, Minister and officials, for being here today. I note, Minister, that you did speak earlier somewhat regarding the Victorian Skills Authority. I was wanting to know, for the benefit of the committee, how have the Victorian Skills Authority jobs and skills centres met the needs of regional Victoria. And, secondly, can you tell you more about the \$12.4 million of ongoing funding for jobs and skills centres and efforts to engage regional Victoria?

Ms TIERNEY: Thank you, Ms Taylor, for that question. Skills and job centres have been with us for a few years now. They were very much a part of the original Skills First framework because we wanted to make the connection between TAFE training and actually getting a job. The best place, we believe, for skills and job centres to be is at TAFE where students are enrolled or their friends are involved and they can come to a skills and job centre at their local TAFE and get the information not just about that TAFE but the whole VET system. It was a great way of just getting people on campus. They have proved to be incredibly successful. There are over 30 skills and job centres across the state, and can I also give a shout-out to those that work in the skills and job centres for the great work that they do.

The other thing we have done is, particularly in terms of our rural areas, noted that there are sometimes geographical barriers to getting to your local TAFE because it might be 2 or 3 hours down the road et cetera, et cetera. Recently I was at Robinvale secondary college and we launched a fleet of skills and jobs vans that are going out to a whole range of places as far away as Charlton and Kerang but also other smaller towns. But it is also about making sure that local schoolkids at the secondary colleges do have immediate access, that they do not wait to go to TAFE or be taken to a TAFE, that it is part and parcel of their toolkit of information—understanding what is available at their local TAFE, what courses they deliver—so that if they wish to, they can stay in town, because they are the next generation of leaders and of course the next generation of people that will be coaching our football and netball teams and making sure that we have got good quality swimming pools in our towns et cetera, et cetera. So these mobile fleets are I think a game-changer, and it is heavily supported in terms of not just the skills and training sector and local industry but the regional partnerships under the portfolio of Minister Mary-Anne Thomas. They fully support this approach, and in fact it was an initiative jointly with SuniTAFE and the regional partnership to bring that to bear.

We also have this amazing orange bus called the GOTAFE bus, and it has a timetable that is online so people know when the GOTAFE bus is going to be in town. It has a proper schedule so they can organise their diaries in advance, and that provides a whole range of things: not just information but also skills on how to prepare your CVs, making appointments with employers—you name it. It is kitted out to actually go into the bus and do mock interviews for job interviews and a whole range of things. Again the feedback that we have had from communities has been overwhelming, and, rest assured, no-one is going to miss that bright orange bus around the GOTAFE campuses and beyond in central Victoria.

Ms TAYLOR: Very good. Something particularly close to my heart, can you tell me about the progress of the clean economy skills and jobs task force and how it will contribute to the *Victorian Skills Plan*?

Ms TIERNEY: Yes. This was one of the recommendations or it was an initiative that was alluded to in the Macklin review, and in the last budget we set aside I think \$10 million for this. This is a body that sits under the umbrella of the VSA again, and it has got all the players that are involved in alternative energy. It has met several times, and it is working on a workforce plan for the clean economy. What I really like about this initiative is that it seriously, in one hit, deals with all of the known issues in technology that we need to work out what skills and employees we need for various streams of the clean economy, so it is almost like a thought incubator to translate the thought and the need for the skill into actually delivering what is needed. A lot of the skills—not all of them, but a lot—have not necessarily been placed in the AQ Framework, so a lot of it is new territory. A lot of the work is about making sure that we have got all the key industry players around the table, that we have got a good mixture of people that understand hands-on learning as well as ICT and even AI and that we have got curriculum development people that know their stuff as well as people that understand the AQ Framework and skill sets, so that work is definitely underway. As I said, it is exciting because it is almost like the new frontier of skills and training, one that obviously is at the heart of many Victorians and indeed, from Saturday's result, the heart of Australians as well. But I will hand over to Craig to give us an update on the clean energy task force, please.

Mr ROBERTSON: Thank you, Minister. As the minister said, the clean economy agenda has the potential to transform many parts of the economy. We are alert to, of course, that the target by the early 2030s is clean energy, and that will be the driving force for other parts of climate adaptation including the recycling economy and the like. The task force has brought together representatives who are experts in this field both from clean economy dimensions as well as skill interventions and the like, and they have really been giving some incredible insights into what will be the capability that we will require in Victoria. The real advantage is, as the minister indicated, whilst the matter is urgent we still have some time to be able to make sure that we appropriately skill the workforce. Now, the issue is that some of these skills are not known yet, but we know that we can get pretty close to that, and so that will be the priority of the task force in establishing a strategy.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. Mr O'Brien.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Thank you, Chair. Good morning, Minister and team. Secretary, can I ask—or perhaps Mr Bates, I am not sure whether it would be yours or not—last year we asked about five of the 12 TAFEs across the state requiring letters of comfort. Are you able to tell me whether any of those have requested that again from the government this year?

Mr BATES: Mr O'Brien, I think Dr Csar has carriage of that.

Dr CSAR: Thank you for the question. You might recall I think last year—in fact, as a matter of fact last year eight TAFEs required letters of comfort.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Right.

Dr CSAR: The pressures of the pandemic, impacts on revenue and uncertainty generally led to that requirement. In the year that has just completed—the training year, the calendar year of 2021—four TAFEs sought letters of comfort for a range of reasons. William Angliss, you would probably be familiar, has a very big exposure to international students and of course with the borders closed and lack of mobility and the uncertainty about when that would return they sought a letter of comfort, and that enabled them to have an unqualified set of accounts.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Okay. That is fine. The four are there, yes? Thank you. Can I ask perhaps Dr Booth—no, in fact I should go to the minister on this—Minister, the output for your portfolio has been cut by 4.5 per cent, or \$117 million. How many students will miss out on courses or jobs be cut because of the \$117 million cut?

Ms TIERNEY: There has been no cut. There will be no student enrolments cut and there will not be—

Mr D O'BRIEN: Sorry, Minister, you are—

Ms TIERNEY: No, excuse me, you have asked me a question and I am attempting to answer it.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Your answers are required to be relevant to the question.

Ms TIERNEY: I am being very relevant.

The CHAIR: Mr O'Brien—

Mr D O'BRIEN: If you would like to go to page 139, Minister, of budget paper 3—

Ms TIERNEY: I have seen it.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Okay, well, then you know that it says that there is a \$117 million reduction. It is there in black and white: 'Training, Higher Education and Workforce Development'—4.5 per cent cut. So please do not tell this committee there is no cut when it is there in black and white in your budget papers. Now, what will be the impact of that cut?

Ms TIERNEY: Mr O'Brien, you clearly also did not read what is underneath that on that page, because it talks about a one-off initiative that this government made during the pandemic, which was a \$350 million commitment, a fund called the Victorian higher education investment fund for the university sector. It was not necessarily there to continue at all. It was there because the federal government at the time refused to support the university sector whilst it was going through its hardest time. It would not even afford the sector JobKeeper. Now, it was this government that understood the importance of the university sector. We understood that they were having difficulties and so we established this \$350 million fund so that we could marry up government priorities and the capabilities and the capacity of the university sector to get on and do a whole range of activities that were really important for our economy. And of course there has been significant research that has been undertaken—

Mr D O'BRIEN: So we started with 'There's no cut' and now we acknowledge that there is.

The CHAIR: Mr O'Brien!

Ms TIERNEY: There was also a lot of work and research in pharmacology, which obviously was incredibly important, and there were also a lot of health and allied health types of projects that have been approved and are being undertaken within the university sector. We also provided a deferral of payroll tax so that the universities did not—

Mr D O'BRIEN: That was not out of your portfolio, Minister.

Ms TIERNEY: I am talking about alleviating the issues that were confronting the university sector.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Hang on. Last year you refused to answer questions from me about the Treasury portfolio; now you are trying to use it as an excuse for the cut.

Ms TIERNEY: There is no cut—and you are misleading this committee. You are misleading this committee.

Mr D O'BRIEN: You cannot have it both ways.

The CHAIR: Mr O'Brien! Thank you.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Okay. Can I move on. Minister, page 158 of budget paper 3, 'Number of government subsidised course enrolments': the target is 317 000 for 2022–23, yet in 2016–17 it was 389 000. Why have you reduced the number of enrolments by 71 000 in the last couple of years?

Ms ATTA: Sorry, Mr O'Brien. Can you just repeat the performance measure.

Mr D O'BRIEN: The very first one. Budget paper 3, page 158, 'Number of government subsidised course enrolments'—317 000 was the target; it was 389 000 four years ago. I might say, it has been reduced consistently over the last couple of years, so there are less people in training in government-subsidised course enrolments.

Ms TIERNEY: Actually, Dr Booth, can you check on that while I just check my note.

Dr BOOTH: Yes. As you would know, Mr O'Brien, training in Victoria operates under a training guarantee, and those settings remain unchanged. So any Victorian who is upgrading their qualifications, upskilling, continues to have access to a government-funded place.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Why have you reduced the performance measure targets then?

Dr BOOTH: The target is based on the forecast level of activity based on the labour market conditions in which we find ourselves. It is important for the committee to note that the training guarantee remains unchanged. We want Victorians to access training, and all eligible Victorians continue to be able to access training and their access has not changed. The way we have to budget for that, to be responsible in our budgeting, is to anticipate what we think the demand will be and provision for that, but if the level of activity exceeds that over the course of the year those settings remain unchanged. So no Victorian is seeing a reduced access to training under these budgets.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Okay. The 2020–21 actual was 297 000; the expected outcome this year is 328 000. So there is still significantly less than what was targeted four years ago. Can I add, too, the regional targets. The number of government-subsidised course enrolments by students living in regional Victoria has also reduced from 104 000 to, this year, 81 300. You mentioned that they are set by market conditions. We all know there is a massive skills shortage. How can it possibly be that we are looking to train less people now that we were three or four years ago when unemployment is so low and people are struggling to find workers?

Ms TIERNEY: The answer simply is that you cannot actually force people to enrol, but what this government understands—

Mr D O'BRIEN: Surely there is massive demand, though, Minister.

Ms TIERNEY: is that we remove the barriers. So free TAFE has been incredibly important in increasing the enrolment numbers. As I said, from our first year in government the enrolment figures are up. We have got rid of the fake enrolments—

Mr D O'BRIEN: They have been down for the last few years, Minister.

Ms TIERNEY: that happened under the previous government. Indeed the member is just quite conveniently forgetting that we have had over 100 000 Victorians undertake the free TAFE courses, and he is also conveniently forgetting that we have also had a pandemic. We have a very proud record when it comes to skills and training in this state.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Everything else is going up, Minister, but it suits you to have this one.

Ms TIERNEY: We are very pleased with the performance.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Deputy Chair. Thank you, Minister. The member's time has expired. Mr Richardson.

Mr RICHARDSON: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Minister and department representatives, for joining us again this morning. I want to take you to the topic, Minister, of TAFE investment and take you to budget paper 3, page 9, which outlines the Victorian government's additional funding in the 2022–23 Victorian budget for the training and skills portfolio. For the committee's benefit, are you able to explain the benefits of this package and how it complements previous government investment in this area?

Ms TIERNEY: Thank you, Mr Richardson, for that question. The additional funding identified in this year's budget goes to show the importance of, as I have said before, consistency and consistent investment in TAFE and our training system. It has been this government's approach to invest in areas where there is demonstrated value and to increase the value generally on skills, and I think we are making some significant headway there. When I look back, we had a situation where VET's and TAFE's reputations were in tatters; we now have a situation where we can have serious conversations with students and parents about VET being equal to university entrance. This is a genuine pathway that leads to not just a great job but a fantastic career. It means that you can if you want to go off and create your own small business, or large business, employ other VET graduates and have a very healthy business to make a contribution to the Victorian economy, but you also can do further higher education that will connect up to a whole range of other things that you might not have thought of when you originally enrolled at a TAFE institute.

That value proposition, I think, is really gaining some strength, and as you would have heard from Minister Merlino, the secondary pathways work. That is very much part of this budget because in so many ways it is that piece that needed to be built to connect the secondary school system to the post-school system. By making sure that we have got an embedded allocation of funds that is significant and a new way of going about providing pathways in a real, real way for Victorians, it will mean that more people in Victoria will see the value of a TAFE course or a VET course that will give them that fantastic job and career, and for many of course they also will not be encumbered by a HECS debt. But it is a very genuine and deliberate way of doing things. I often say to people, 'Yes, it's great, and yes, we do have skills shortages, but can you imagine a Victoria without free TAFE and us not introducing free TAFE in 2019 before COVID hit?'. In terms of other states, we are pretty well placed to do what we need to do to fill those shortages. Whether it be in terms of free TAFE or VET generally, I think the future is bright.

That is not to say that we have not got more work to do; we have got a lot more work to do in skills and training. I want to get that alignment between delivery and industry tighter, even more than what it is at the moment. I want to be able to see all the dots connecting between people undertaking courses and going into well-paid jobs, I want the curriculum improved, I want to see a greater exchange of staff from industry and from our TAFE sector so that we maintain a very relevant training system that caters for the needs of individuals as well as industry and I want to create that level of excellence that often is just the domain of universities. I want it in the VET sector so that we can actually build that pride of that craftspersonship attached to that higher order skill that people have from using their hands as well as their minds and to also get a greater connection between hands-on learning and theoretical learning, so that we have a true melding of the best capabilities of our young people as well as those that are in the workforce that want to change their careers.

Mr RICHARDSON: That is fantastic, and linking it with the VCE, VET and VCAL reforms is a massive piece of work. I want to dive into TAFE capital, Minister. In light of the significant contributions made in recent years, are you able to provide an update for the committee on the capital investments that have occurred in the context of the Victorian budget?

Ms TIERNEY: We have invested something like—I stand to be corrected, but I think it is around about \$457 million in capital works. There is a long list of TAFEs that have been rebuilt, and it is nothing for me each week to go and check on progress and/or open a whole range of different capital works. They are exciting, because the capital works that are undertaken on our TAFE campuses now are absolutely on par with a university. When I think of Kangan at Bendigo, my goodness, that was such a sad and sorry story. Now you go right up to the top of the latest building that we have completed and you look down, and you think, 'My God. This isn't a university campus? This is an amazing TAFE campus'—and that is replicated all over the state.

But we are not just dealing with TAFE capital, we are also working with local government as well. One of my key projects is the Warrnambool learning and library hub, where we have got TAFE students actually building it. There is a banner on the construction site that says, 'Local TAFE students building your local library', and there is a significant investment there. We just opened, not all that long ago, the new Morwell trades centre—again, an amazing building. That was on top of the early learning and nursing building that we opened across the road from it the previous year.

GOTAFE has had a significant investment, particularly at its Seymour campus. We have also done some serious refurbishment work at SuniTAFE and Wodonga. Chisholm—we turned the sod out there only two weeks ago, again for their next stage. Again, if you have not seen what we have already built, please go and have a look. Their dental assistant laboratory is state of the art. It is absolutely world class. It has got the latest equipment, and I would encourage anyone from the community to go there. And while they are there, they can also go downstairs and maybe have a haircut and go to the beauty salon as well, which again is world class.

There are so many capital works that I can point to that we have invested in, and we have made sure that regional Victoria, regional TAFEs and the port of Sale have also got some well-deserved capital works in their local community. I am very pleased, very proud, and again I encourage anyone to go to any TAFE they wish, to come and have a look at this amazing program that is underway.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. Mr Hibbins.

Mr HIBBINS: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Minister and your team, for appearing today. Can I first go to a project of importance to my electorate in Prahran. Obviously you would be well aware that there is a real shared vision across our community for an arts and education precinct on the Prahran TAFE site.

Ms TIERNEY: Yes.

Mr HIBBINS: Are you able to provide the committee with an update in terms of the latest information on the acquisition of that site?

Ms TIERNEY: Yes. Look, thank you, Mr Hibbins. It is of no surprise that you inquire as to where things are up to. As you would be aware, the Victorian government has reached an in-principle agreement with Swinburne to purchase the Prahran campus, securing its future as a vibrant education and arts precinct with ongoing access to training. As a condition of the proposed sale the Victorian government will secure a commitment from Swinburne to invest almost half of the sale proceeds back into its other TAFE campuses, its VET component—as you know, Swinburne is a dual-sector university. The purchase will allow the Victorian government to secure the future for world-class training at the site and engage in a comprehensive master planning process to determine the preferred mix of uses in collaboration with the stakeholders, including existing tenants, students, trainers, industry and local government.

Swinburne has not been used as a training delivery site itself since 2013, when it was gifted by the previous government, but Melbourne Polytechnic has delivered high-quality vocational education and training over this period. I have been out there three times just even in the Auslan area, which is pretty exciting, and I am very pleased to have seen not just their work recognised in the budget but many Auslan teachers from Melbourne Poly being at RMIT the other morning when I announced the advanced diploma. In terms of further information, I think I would ask Dr Csar to provide some further information.

Dr CSAR: Thank you, Minister. Discussions are continuing with Swinburne on the terms. Of course ultimately it is a commercial deal, and that will be informed by assessments by the valuer-general. But concurrent with that we will be undertaking a master planning process with the existing users and other users, being mindful of the adjacent school and ensuring that the final form meets that educational precinct environment that we are seeking to achieve.

Mr HIBBINS: And what is the time line for the master plan?

Dr CSAR: We will commence the master plan in the second half of the year. The timing really does depend on our negotiations with Swinburne and so on.

Mr HIBBINS: Yes. And how long do you foresee that master planning process will take?

Dr CSAR: We should have a fairly reasonable idea towards the last quarter of the calendar year.

Mr HIBBINS: Okay, great. Thank you. I would like to ask now in regard to developing skills to meet the demand for EV mechanics in the future. Obviously this is a growing market, and the demand for EV mechanics is obviously going to increase. Is there anything in this year's budget or any in the foreseeable future to address the future demand for EV mechanics?

Ms TIERNEY: What I can tell you is that that is part of the discussions of the clean energy workforce task force. But more time relevant is that recently I announced I think it was a \$1.6 million grant, and that is specifically for EV employees in the bus sector who are quite concerned about losing their job. There is a project that is being developed with BKI that will assist in this regard. I was at BKI Docklands very recently and saw that funds that we have been able to provide have provided for the third EV laboratory. They are pretty amazing to see. They are at the cutting edge not just here in Australia but across the board, and there is a lot of international interaction in terms of EV initiatives. I think Cameron Baker might be able to provide even more information on what we are doing in relation to EV.

Mr BAKER: Thank you, Minister. In relation to EV and the transitional arrangements we are doing, it is covered with skill sets as well—we are focusing in on nationally endorsed skill sets. There are three within the automotive service and repair package, so we are looking at rolling that out. I am working with Dr Booth on that particular aspect. With the heavy vehicle transition to EV, working with BKI they have their specialist centre in Docklands at ACE, and they are equipped to run that pilot program. From an Apprenticeships Victoria perspective too, it is really important that we are looking at a post-trade skilling pathway as well for existing heavy-diesel-qualified mechanics but also for the apprentices that are going through ACE, and working with those bus franchisees to get access to those new skill sets and that new equipment and training.

Mr HIBBINS: Okay, terrific. Thank you. Finally, Minister, do you have information in terms of what the current recurrent hourly VET funding rate is across the entire sector?

Ms TIERNEY: I will defer to one of my colleagues, but I know that it was increased in the previous budget, the hourly rate. Dr Booth.

Dr BOOTH: So there are a range of hourly rates. They are published as part of those tax-funded course lists. So there are slightly under 700 courses on that list, and they all have a published hourly rate. Those rates vary quite significantly according to the cost of delivery, so I would refer you in the first instance to that funded course list, which shows the range of rates. Because VET is a competency-based completion system, each individual student can take either a little or quite a long period of time to finish, based on their existing level of skills. So that needs to be read—

Mr HIBBINS: Do you have one for the entire state? Do you have it all put together in terms of—

Dr BOOTH: Yes. The funded course list has the hourly rate, and then there is the purchasing guide that specifies the maximum payable hours for any given course. So they are all publicly available. We are happy to provide you information on where you can access those rates.

Mr HIBBINS: Right.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. That concludes the time we have set aside for consideration of these estimates with you today. We thank you for appearing before the committee. We 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 1-hour break before resuming consideration of the estimates with Mr Carbines. Thank you.

Witnesses withdrew.

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.