

Thriving children and families

Significant initiatives

Key investments in universal services include:

- **More support for mums, dads and babies**
\$15.5m in 2023-24 (\$71.2m/4 yrs) to deliver responsive health care for mums, dads, babies and children and boost the capacity of universal Maternal and Child Health (MCH) services. Investments set out to respond to the growing needs and complexities of families, further expand the Early Parenting Centre network and deliver targeted and flexible support for mothers, fathers, multicultural communities and Aboriginal families. VCOSS notes the language in this descriptor is technical language drawn directly from the Budget papers (to assist our members to cross-reference our analysis). We acknowledge and celebrate the diversity of all Victorian families.
- **Best Start, Best Life**
 - \$1.8 billion in 2023-24 to continue the delivery of high-quality, free kindergarten programs for three- and four-year-olds
 - \$1.2 billion to expand early learning infrastructure through the landmark Best Start, Best Life reform package.
- **Supporting inclusion in kindergarten for children with additional needs**
\$4.5m for 2023-24 (\$18.1m/4 yrs) funding to support inclusion in kindergarten for children with additional needs.
- **Our Place partnership and place-based education plans**
\$1.8m in 2023-24 (\$19.3m/4 yrs) to continue and expand the Our Place hub model, which establishes co-located early childhood education, Maternal and Child Health, health services and allied health, schools and adult and community further education into a one-stop shop in response to community needs, using the universal platform of schools.
- **Books in prep bags**
\$800,000 in 2023-24 (\$3.8m/4 yrs) to continue to supply free books in prep bags to support family engagement with quality literature from an early age and encourage parents and carers to read frequently to their children.

Key investments in early intervention include:

- **Responding to family services demand**
\$11.1m in 2023-24 to continue trials to embed family services in universal settings such as schools, early years services and community health hubs to provide more accessible services for vulnerable families.

Investments in children in care or at risk of system engagement

- **Stronger Families – Closing the Gap by transforming the children and families service system**
\$20.9m in 2023-24 (\$139.9m/4 yrs) to reform the children and families system to reduce Aboriginal overrepresentation in child protection and family services.
- **Delivering improved outcomes for children in residential care**
\$171.1m in 2023-24 (\$548.3m/4 yrs) to:
 - Respond to demand for residential care placements to support children and young people.
 - Increase therapeutic supports in residential care homes and address child sexual exploitation.

- Continue the provision of targeted care packages to support children and young people to live in suitable care arrangements and to prevent entry into residential care.
- **Targeted health support for children in care**
\$4.6m in 2023-24 (\$37.8/4 yrs) to deliver multidisciplinary health assessments, access to in reach nursing, and health management plans to improve health outcomes for up to 5,000 vulnerable children and young people in state care, to reduce acute health service usage.
- **Housing First for young people leaving residential care**
\$5.8m in 2022-23 (\$32.6m/4 yrs) to deliver a Housing First approach (access to housing and multidisciplinary support) for approximately 225 young people with complex needs in existing residential care and other settings.

What's good

- The first [1000 days](#) of a child's life are a critical period that shapes their development and wellbeing. Knowing the importance of this life stage, we welcome the Government's investments in responsive Maternal and Child Health services to support families through what is often a challenging time. Understanding that the early years is often a time when family violence or mental health issues can escalate, we welcome the additional support that will enable early identification and response in line with the needs of families. Further, we welcome the investment in culturally-informed, specialist service streams for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, as well as multicultural communities.
- As outlined in our response to the Education budget, VCOSS wholeheartedly endorses Victoria's flagship '*Best Start, Best Life*' initiative and the \$6.2 billion the government has invested in the initiative to date. From an education perspective, these significant investments will boost children's participation in early learning and result in positive education outcomes, and will facilitate smooth transitions to primary school. From a health and wellbeing perspective the '*Best Start, Best Life*' initiative will also lead to positive outcomes for children and their families by fostering social connections, providing opportunities for early intervention when health and wellbeing issues arise. In addition, increasing access to kindergarten across the state has the potential to make a huge

What's missing

- While this Budget does invest in more support for mums, dads and babies, VCOSS is disappointed that this Budget did not specifically provide funding to scale and sustain provision of right@home across Victoria, so that it is accessible to all families who need it. The right@home program uses the existing Maternal and Child Health workforce to provide 25 structured home visits to vulnerable families. The visits start before a child is born and continue over the child's first two years. The program has been shown to improve parent care and connection. It's a high-impact, evidence-informed initiative that aligns with eight recommendations from the Mental Health Royal Commission, as well as ongoing family violence reforms. Currently, the program only operates in four areas of Victoria: Ballarat, Dandenong, Frankston and Whittlesea. This program should be recurrently funded as 'business as usual' across Victoria.
- Together with Victoria's Centre for Community Child Health, VCOSS has been advocating for a trial of new targeted investments in neighbourhoods that have the highest levels of childhood disadvantage. Looking ahead, we'd like to see the government invest – through the EIFF – in a multi-sector, multi-partner trial of 'Beyond the Silver Bullet', informed by the CCCH's '[Restacking the Odds](#)' research. The trial would identify 10 transformational interventions and deliver them in 20 priority communities. The sites – and the 10 interventions – would be selected with

difference to women's financial security and participation in employment.

- The Our Place model provides a great example of how co-located services can provide wraparound support to communities over the course of their life and through a child's developmental trajectory. We are pleased to see funding to maintain momentum in three areas, including investment in an additional site in Shepparton. We hope to see the model extend further in coming years.
- This Budget makes important investments in children, young people and families engaged with family services, the Out of Home Care system (residential care services) and Child Protection, with an enhanced focus on therapeutic interventions. As the sector continues to work with government to move towards a system that can work earlier and more effectively to improve long-term social outcomes for children and families, it is significant that several of the child and family services Budget measures are located in the Early Intervention Investment Framework.
- In his address to sector representatives in the Budget lock-up, the Premier highlighted the Government's commitment to addressing the devastating legacy of colonisation on First Nations children and families in this Budget, through Closing the Gap investment in child and family services. VCOSS welcomes the provision of almost \$140m over four years to support self-determined approaches to address the overrepresentation of First Nations families in the Child Protection system. This funding will enable:
 - The transfer of an additional 774 Aboriginal children to the Aboriginal Children in Aboriginal Care program
 - Expansion of the Community Protecting Boorais trial, an Aboriginal-led investigation team for child protection reports, for 348 Aboriginal children
 - Early intervention supports, including Koorie supported playgroups, the Aboriginal Rapid Response service model, and the Family

government. The interventions could include sustained nurse home visiting, playgroup participation, childcare attendance, parenting programs, access to green spaces, and financial support. Many of these interventions already exist. The difference in this trial is that they would be combined (or 'stacked') in neighbourhoods, and every child and family in the trial would receive every intervention in the antenatal to school-entry period, to accelerate equitable outcomes.

We believe that this early intervention suite could end childhood inequity in Victoria in a decade and provide a global template for disrupting early childhood disadvantage. It would complement the government's landmark investment in boosting children's participation in early learning through the *Best Start, Best Life* reforms.

Preservation and Reunification Response for Aboriginal families

- Continued support for the Aboriginal Workforce Fund, business planning resources for Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations, targeted training packages for approximately 100 sector workers and support for the Aboriginal Community Infrastructure Program.
- The Budget provides \$10.2m in *Investing early where it matters* to continue programs within the Youth portfolio. These include the Marram Nganyin Aboriginal Youth Mentoring Program and Le Mana Pasifika. Extending these programs ensures young people have access to culturally-embedded supports that can strengthen their health and wellbeing and assist them to remain engaged in education and/or employment. The package also delivers further investment in the Regional Presence Project delivered by the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria (YACVic) and Centre for Multicultural Youth (CMY). This supports the continuation of vital research, advocacy and sector capacity building to build and maintain a highly skilled youth workforce across rural and regional Victoria.