

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the Recruitment Methods and Impacts of Cults and Organised Fringe Groups

Melbourne – Monday 1 December 2025

MEMBERS

Ella George – Chair

Cindy McLeish

Annabelle Cleeland – Deputy Chair

Jackson Taylor

Chris Couzens

Rachel Westaway

John Lister

WITNESS (*via videoconference*)

Leigh Bartlett, Executive Officer, Barwon Adolescent Task Force.

The CHAIR: Good afternoon. My name is Ella George, and I am the Chair of the Legislative Assembly's Legal and Social Issues Committee. I declare open this public hearing of the Legislative Assembly Legal and Social Issues Committee's Inquiry into the Recruitment Methods and Impacts of Cults and Organised Fringe Groups.

I begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we are meeting today, the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung people of the Kulin nation, and I pay my respects to their elders past, present and future.

I also would like to acknowledge my colleagues here today: Cindy McLeish, the Member for Eildon; Annabelle Cleland, the Member for Euroa and Deputy Chair; Christine Couzens, the Member for Geelong; and John Lister, the Member for Werribee.

On 3 April 2025 the Legislative Assembly's Legal and Social Issues Committee was referred an inquiry into cults and organised fringe groups. The terms of reference require the committee to inquire into cults and organised fringe groups in Victoria, the methods used to recruit and control their members and the impacts of coercive control and report back no later than 30 September 2026. Today the committee is holding its eighth day of public hearings.

This inquiry is not about judging or questioning anyone's beliefs. What we are focused on are the behaviours of high control groups that use coercive techniques to recruit and control their members and the impacts of these behaviours. The evidence we are hearing will continue to help the committee shape practical and balanced recommendations. On behalf of the committee, I would like to take this opportunity to thank all those who have engaged with the inquiry thus far, particularly the individuals and families who have bravely shared their personal experiences with coercive high control groups.

This afternoon the committee will hear from Leigh Bartlett, Executive Officer at BATForce. I thank Leigh for her time and interest in participating in this important inquiry.

All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard and broadcast live.

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

We will now commence the public hearing. Once again I welcome Leigh Bartlett. Leigh, I invite you to make a brief opening statement, and this will be followed by questions from members.

Leigh BARTLETT: Thank you all for giving your time today to hear what we have to say. I acknowledge and I am presenting from down on Gunditjmara country today and pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging.

BATForce is really privileged to work across Wadawurrung, Gulidjan and Gadubanud country – from Lara through to Colac Otway, down to Apollo Bay, out to Queenscliff. So we have got a fairly big region.

But that is not what brought me to this space today. I suppose I just want to give a little bit of an organic account of how this came about. BATForce has always been in a unique position in that we work across whole of community. Whilst we are a youth-specific agency, we understand that young people are part of a much bigger ecosystem. That means we do not count anybody out, we count everybody in. A lot of our work in the last few years as agencies have gotten bigger has been very organic in nature through co-design, working with community to find out what their needs are, their gaps and their barriers. About 12 months ago I listened to Richard Baker's podcast, and I decided to send him a message. I asked if he would ever consider doing a companion piece to go with it, because once you raise a big issue or shine light on an issue, there is always a need for people to have information, both people going through the process but also the ecosystem around people that may be going through the system. We got chatting, and he gave my number to a few people, and a few people rang us.

One of the things that had worked really well for us during lockdown was we would work with community and find out where gaps were, and we started to build this community wellbeing dashboard, which was just a series of short, sharp dashboards which had information that was informed by community. We really quickly worked out with this process that this was something that potentially may be part of a solution going forward. When we

talk about community, I suppose in this instance we worked out really quickly that community was not just people who were survivors, it was the ecosystem around them. It was young people. It was adults who were then starting their next stages – families, things like that. But also the service system. The service system is a really critical piece for this. We started just having a quick chat around the place and going, ‘Well, what can we do?’ So we started the conversation with local agencies but also some of the local survivors.

Some of the survivors we were working with talked about this dashboard as something they wanted to find out more about. Over the last sort of six months we have worked with them about populating this dashboard. Through that, we have been finding out more about stories – we cannot pretend to have gone on the journey that they have gone on, but we can certainly do the listening and the co-design. So what we have done is we have built a small community wellbeing dashboard with very discrete information. It is very much still in that what we call ‘satellite stage’. But I suppose we put forward what we had learned. A few of the things that we had learned along the way were that there was a real complexity for the people we had spoken to in as much as when young people leave a coercive control situation, it is finding safety with housing, safety with education and safety and security back in community. When adults become parents and carers themselves, when they have not had that extended family to lean back on, their journey is very different again. So how could we then link this into the other support boards we have had? That is kind of the work and the journey we went on. I suppose it is a dual-lens approach here. We will be looking – what we have done so far is talk to the survivors but also start to talk to the sector and say, ‘How can we do it differently in a contracted funding environment, but also what does this look like at the end of the inquiry?’

I suppose there is one point I do want to make. When it comes to an inquiry, with the people we have spoken to, it is very much a little bit of excitement; there is a little bit of energy. There is energy there that says, ‘Okay, something’s going to happen, and we understand that that’s not going to happen straight away.’ So finding something that they can use as a support to move forward, because for a lot of the people we speak to – the bravery that they have done to tell their stories – this is going to be a really long process from now. And, you know, it is the type of project that if we put an ethics proposal in, we would not get forward because inquiries take a very long time to come to some sort of conclusion.

I do not know what parts of this you want me to focus on. Are you happy to start asking questions, or what works for you?

The CHAIR: Yes, we would be happy to ask some questions, Leigh, if that is okay with you – if you are ready to kick off with some questions.

Leigh BARTLETT: Yes.

The CHAIR: Great. Firstly, thank you for the opening statement and for the great overview of your work. My first question is around that data collection piece that you have done. Is there any data from the dashboard that you could share with the committee?

Leigh BARTLETT: Two different things – the data from the dashboard is who uses the dashboard. It is not specifically targeted to survivors. At the moment we have had about 32,000 hits on our dashboard in the last few years, and that is across the whole of the community. We have not actually got data as such on this part of the dashboard yet because we have kept it very discreet, because we wanted to get it to a point where the people who were working with the co-design people were happy with the content and what we were doing, so it has really only just gone live.

The CHAIR: Okay, no worries. One of the things we have been exploring throughout this inquiry is the impact of high control groups and coercive control groups on young people and how we raise more awareness amongst young people about the warning signs and the potential signs of recruitment. How can the Victorian government raise more awareness among young people about these warning signs of controlling or coercive environments?

Leigh BARTLETT: In my experience of over thirty-five years in the youth sector, one of the concerns I have is that we silo information to young people. We tend to see schools as a fish-in-a-barrel approach to getting information out to young people, and in doing that, we often miss the most vulnerable cohorts because they are not sitting in that environment. We silo drug and alcohol information, mental health information and everything separately when often it is about teaching young people to feel those flags: ‘What does it feel like

when you do not feel comfortable?" All of a sudden we are teaching it all separately as opposed to bringing it down to teaching what are the common factors across the board, rather than siloing it out and doing it all separately. If something does not feel right, what does that feel like? What is your agency? What does it feel like when you are your authentic self? What does agency feel like? It is stepping that up from primary school so that by the time students leave primary school they have a real sense of what their authentic self is; what coercive control feels like, whether it is in a relationship or it is institutional; and understanding their sensory self. There are a whole range of pieces of work we can be doing together as opposed to funding multiple groups to come at it from different angles. That is when we start to embed this work in that – this is how you should be feeling within an institution; this is how you should be feeling within a school – so that it is coming across every single area.

The other part that we know is that by years 5 or 6, a lot of young people – we were probably presented a couple of hundred times in the last two years with years 5 and 6 students who get to an age by grade 5 or 6 where they do not want to speak out. They are more likely at years 3 to 4 to speak out than they are at 5–6. If something is wrong, they do not want to be seen to be speaking out against something. They start to get that fear of getting in trouble – those sorts of things. So we are looking at really embedding those skills early. Also, one of the problems we have when we work in schools is we tend to have somebody come in and do one key message and leave. If I was to ask you all if you knew the SunSmart message, you would all know it, but chances are you have been sunburnt in the last four years. It has got to be key messaging in an ongoing way around that broader issue but then skilling up the people around them to know when to pick that up, if that makes sense, because it will just become another going in and telling young people, 'This is another area.' And if 90 per cent of the students are not feeling that at that particular time, it gets lost very quickly.

The CHAIR: Leigh, you spoke then about older students who might not feel comfortable about speaking up and saying something is not quite right or saying, 'Something is wrong here.' I am interested to know, for young people who might be in that coercive or controlling environment already, what strategies do you think are best to help them find trusted support and seek help?

Leigh BARTLETT: There is that great expectation piece of, by years 3 or 4, knowing who is that one teacher in the school you would go to for help if something went wrong, not targeting it down to if something went wrong in this particular issue. You build those relationships between that, almost going back to an old protective behaviours framework of 'Who are the five people in your world you would go to?' You start that at year 2, year 3, year 4, so it gets visited every single year. And for those students, when something is not feeling right, you start that conversation. It is a skill that has got to be practiced. We cannot just expect a student to draw on it. I worked in student wellbeing for a few years, and a number of students did not come in until things were really on the rocks, because they did not feel that they had permission. If students do not feel they have got permission from home to speak up, they are far less likely to. So hearing it from a lot of different places and getting that key messaging about speaking up across the board is going to be critical in those first couple of years, but then it is really skilling up, again, that ecosystem to see those flags early.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I will hand over to Annabelle.

Annabelle CLEELAND: Thanks. Thank you, Leigh. You raised a really interesting point around the services on offer and how some of the current restrictions deny people that support, and we have heard that from a few contributors to the inquiry. You referred to children being denied homelessness support through Centrelink because parents are claiming that they have got somewhere to live. We have also heard that for adults as well, with the struggles to get that support. What is your advice on how we could potentially guide change in that policy or procedure to address that gap?

Leigh BARTLETT: I think it is about how we roll out common screening tools across the board. We have some amazing work happening at conference level and at that really high level, but very rarely does it filter down into the worker level. In a region the size of Geelong you have got a really good opportunity to train up a whole heap of staff at once. You have also got a really big turnover in some of those agencies with short-term contracts. There are all the complexities that go with short-term contracts; when you are trying to skill people up to do things like this, this is where you lose out, because you have not got the same person who has done the training the next time. It is about ensuring that when they walk in the door that the psychosocial screening tools that are used pick up those nuances around coercive control. Young people do not always have the language of what it is, so they are not presenting with the right language. It is ensuring the questions that we are asking them

can lead them there. It might be that you would assume a young person would often come in through a homelessness entry point first. I have spoken to the homelessness entry point in Geelong about what this would look like, and the screening tools that are used there are very similar to what are used when they go into Centrelink. There is also that check and balance, if a family says, 'No, they've got somewhere safe to live at home.' We spend a lot of time telling young people, especially young women, that they should be believed when they say something, yet often that is a point where people are not believed. So if we are going to have a culture of believing young people when they present, we need to make sure that is a deep and authentic culture too.

Annabelle CLEELAND: In your experience with some of the services for, say, young people who are trying to leave high control groups or potentially cults, what are the services that they are tapping? Who are they going to first, and where are the major barriers to support?

Leigh BARTLETT: We spoke to adults predominantly. We have not worked directly with young people – well, over the years we have had some young people. But the adults marched their stories back to us and talked about their experiences. For some people, the first thing they want to do is leave the state or leave the region, so they are going to a region that is not even somewhere that they are remotely familiar with, because there is that sense of safety. There is a huge fear – and I am certainly not speaking on behalf of survivors; this is our interpretation of it – of somebody in your community finding out what you have done. If you are in a new region, that can be really complicated.

We have been talking about 'no wrong door' for thirty-five years. The reality is they should be able to go to a school, and that person does not have to know the answer, but they have to take them to the next person who does. That should be the same with our service system. If they present at a library and if they present anywhere – and we are seeing more people present at libraries, bizarrely, now. I have just done some training for Geelong Regional Libraries. It does not matter where they present, there has to be an agreement locally that if you do not know the answer, your job is to take them somewhere else. But the psychosocial screening has to collect the story as it goes so that the young person does not have to continue to retell their story over and over. Again, that is something we have been trying to get right for thirty years.

Annabelle CLEELAND: Just to supplement what you were saying about the Geelong library training, is there a region, a group or a country that is doing that 'no wrong door' policy well when it comes to support for individuals leaving cults?

Leigh BARTLETT: That is not something I have done a whole heap of work with, and I know there are a lot of experts doing work on that. My work has been about just listening and building that base-level resource to begin and then tapping that work into it. It is actually incredible, the resources that I have had sent to me by some of the cult survivors. They have done so much deep diving and so much heavy lifting themselves to research. So I would have to be guided by somebody a lot more in the know than me. I need to point out, too, that this is not work I am funded to do; this is work that fell sideways on us.

Annabelle CLEELAND: That is good. I usually ask that question, but I was not going to, so I am glad you added that in. Thank you, Leigh; I appreciate that and appreciate the work you are doing.

The CHAIR: Christine.

Chris COUZENS: Thanks, Leigh – I really appreciate the work that you put into this – for being online today. My question is around the mechanisms or engagement strategies that work best for ensuring survivors of high control coercive environments have a genuine voice in government reform efforts.

Leigh BARTLETT: That is a massive question. Thanks, Chris.

Chris COUZENS: I knew you would like that one.

Leigh BARTLETT: Up all night on that one. I have spent a lot of time thinking about lived experience and meeting with, certainly, people from the mental health sector who have been doing lived experience for a long time and speaking with some of the survivors that we have been working with, who are all in lived-experience roles now. I think it is really a double-edged sword when people are using their story – and we see it in education around the KESO workers. When you are constantly using your story to educate somebody else, I am

not sure that moves us forward, because the onus is not on us to do better as a sector. I think the story guides us. It tells us where the gaps are, it tells us where their barriers are and then it tests the livability of the work we have done. We do not always know where the gaps and barriers are, because we are not looking for them. It is like finding a pothole on a road that you did not drive. So if we can use, with permission – we need to be guided, and any work that is created needs to be tested by these groups in a safe and supported way. That is a really critical piece of this. The telling of the stories over and over and over as a way of trying to fix things – how do we take this down to the pre-service level in our education system? With the complexities of state and federal – all of that – we should be embedding this in teacher education and social work education. This is what should be happening with this work, but we do not – we go back to lived-experience stories to educate us on the big stages. I think that is where we need to rethink this.

The other thing with lived experience – and pulling a little bit on another piece of work I have been doing with parents and carers of children on NDIS – is people setting up their own services because they are just not seeing a service for them or they are seeing a gap that is just not being filled. It is looking at how we can better support with lived-experience training to ensure that mental health of people and that retraumatising is not happening. That lived-experience training, and ensuring that that is offered and free to anybody who is in a position where they are offering up support or advice on how to roll these services out, is absolutely critical.

Chris COUZENS: Great, thank you.

Leigh BARTLETT: Does that answer your question, Chris?

Chris COUZENS: Yes, that covers it a bit. The other question I had was – there has been a bit of talk during the gathering of evidence around the need for or the suggestion of a conference in Victoria. What is your view on that?

Leigh BARTLETT: I have stopped going to conferences because they make you pay – we are a small NGO – even when you are presenting. If you can show me the piece of string from the conference and the presenters at the conference to the person who is at the entry point and to the person who is the first port of call for that young person, I am more than supportive of a conference. But right now we have conferences where the information rarely leaves that room. We are working with a service system where 90% of them will never attend a conference and most of us have stopped presenting at conferences now, if we are from an NGO, because we simply cannot afford it. It is great to get the ideas there and then get the ideas tested, but how we are taking the learnings from that and embedding them in psychosocial screening tools in the service sector and how we are getting that to schools? I am yet to meet a teacher that wanted to be a social worker, but that is the role they are playing, so how do we provide the support to the schools that are going to pick these children up? I remember Mum saying to me years ago, ‘All your kids are equal, but some of your kids are more equal than others.’ This is a very small part of the population, and sometimes we need to do things differently – waiting lists do not necessarily work in this situation when someone is in trauma – to ensure that if this is happening in a school, the school have that wraparound support straightaway, and if this is happening in a sporting club, if it comes up in that environment, there is a wraparound. If that can fall out of a conference, I am all for a conference.

Chris COUZENS: Right. Thanks.

Leigh BARTLETT: But it has got to have that line. It has got to have that piece of string for me.

Chris COUZENS: Yes, thank you.

The CHAIR: Cindy.

Cindy McLEISH: Thank you, Leigh. Thank you for your practicality too. I really have quite enjoyed some of what you were mentioning today. I want to touch again on the psychosocial tools and particularly what tools you are thinking about. Are these tools that are robust and valid, or are they checklists that somebody has made?

Leigh BARTLETT: Again, you would have to go to someone who is a bigger expert than me. My expertise sits around co-design, listening to community and doing that linkage work. If I think back even to when Headspace first rolled out the HEEADSSS tool – it has been a long time since I have been in that part of the

industry, but I rolled out the HEEADSSS tool probably a long time ago, and one of the things that we found was I could teach that to a youth worker and I could teach it to a psychologist. It is just the depth of the relationship built on that tool. There are a lot of experts on tools who can guide you much better than me on this, but we need a tool that can be graduated from that very first port of call and for that information to then be mobile and agile and go with that person, as opposed to retelling their story for a different tool at every single juncture, which is our current system. A psychosocial screening tool which asks a broad range of questions at the start at a youth work level and then somehow finding portability for that information in a safe and secure environment – we have been trying to get that right for a long, long time. I have got answers for that, but it is probably for a different forum, to be honest. But it is finding something that can be used that is really simple but that also can be taken the whole way up there, because that is where it becomes problematic.

Cindy McLEISH: Continuing along this theme, you just mentioned tools for youth work and how they could be rolled out. We talked earlier about getting into nine- and 10-year-olds at grades 3 and 4. Do you know what tools they are using now or how widely they are using any of these tools?

Leigh BARTLETT: We have a really interesting system in Victoria. We have got really good policy from zero to eight, and then we have got policy from twelve to twenty-five, and it is a little bit of a no man's land, with respect, from that eight to twelve space. Most service systems that are developed for eight to twelve really need to be whole of family, and this is where it is problematic. The flag for me would be: can the school engage the family into the school? If they cannot or there is a real separation from engaging the family – some of the families were suggesting by year 10 a lot of these kids are disconnecting from school. Some families are saying they just do not do formal education at all. Finding out where they are – have we got tools that we use? There are different tools for testing for mental health, and there are different tools that they use in schools. But the key thing for me if we are working with a school population is: can we engage the school? How is the child connected? An example of that: if I asked a group of teachers – and I run a lot of professional development – to tell me every risk factor the children in their class have got, they can name them. If I ask them to list all the protective factors those kids have got, very few can go through and say, 'I know where this person is connected in the community. I know who the teacher is this person would go to.' We tend to measure for deficit, we do not measure for connection, and sometimes when you are looking for things like coercive control, measuring for connection can actually be helpful, because you start to see the patterns.

Cindy McLEISH: That is an interesting point, and I am quite mindful of the fact that a number of people who have presented to us have said through their group organisation that they are actively discouraged from having other friends and being involved in sport and things like that, so I imagine it would be probably quite tricky to try and get the families to come down to the school if their belief is that you need to keep a separate as you can.

Leigh BARTLETT: So that is your flag, and if we cannot measure for it – I have been running parent and carer education for eighteen years. School–family partnerships are probably at their lowest point. I am also for the first time starting to see families with, you know, more fringe ideas at some of these sessions. We have had a lot of conversations about 5G in the last three years that I potentially had not had in the first thirteen, and I know a little bit more about being a sovereign citizen than potentially what I did when I first started.

Cindy McLEISH: As do we.

Leigh BARTLETT: It was not where I was going, but hey, we all learn as we go. But if we start measuring for connection through, you know, asking a student, you can find out a lot by saying, 'Do you do activities outside school?' Then you can start to explore that. You know, parents and carers turning up to parent–teacher interviews – these are big flags if we are not getting that level of connection.

Cindy McLEISH: Great, thank you.

Leigh BARTLETT: We are waiting for something to break before we are measuring it.

Cindy McLEISH: Yes. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks. Leigh, I might just wrap up with a couple of questions around the MARAM framework. Other submissions have recommended that something similar to the MARAM framework that specifically looks at the indicators regarding group-based coercion would be valuable. What I would like to talk

to you about is whether you agree about expanding the MARAM framework or whether perhaps a tool that sits under the overarching MARAM framework would be a way to start understanding the dynamics of group-based coercive control better?

Leigh BARTLETT: I think we need to understand it. Who do we decide needs to be the ones understanding it? With people's workloads now, the amount of training, the different frameworks they are having to pull on, they end up getting a shallow understanding of all of them. Finding the commonalities between frameworks is really important – coercive control in a relationship, coercive control in an institution, you know, starting to think about where these common themes are and how we can start to pull these together. But also, every time we build one of these frames, what is the onus on getting this into pre-service? We are retrofitting workforces all over the place at the moment, and these are workforces predominantly that are moving on very, very quickly because they are short contracts. So yes, in theory I think it is great. Do we have the right environment to do that? I will leave that up to you to judge. But if your staff have only got two years funding at any one time and they have got to train up in these frameworks and then halfway through they have realised they have only got three months left of a contract, they have already moved on. So unless they are at that point – and you can say an agency is trained up, but even in a school, if a school is trained up right now, if you did an audit of Victorian schools and said, 'How many people have got this training? How many people have got this training?' can we find that? You know, so many different trainings have rolled out. If you simply did an audit across the school – if we look at all the year 9 teachers, of those leadership teachers, who do we know who is trained up in which framework? That is one of the things we need to start to think about. How do we measure for who is trained up in it? So yes, I agree. There is a need to extend it – information is always power – but how do we test who has got it, how do we get it into pre-service and how do we get it into those unusual spots that we would not usually get it?

The CHAIR: Okay. Thank you. And just one more question, Leigh: you have noticed that survivors often face long waiting periods and confusing service systems. What are some of the short-term practical supports that could be implemented while people are in this holding pattern to prevent their disengagement from seeking support and also to prevent retraumatisation?

Leigh BARTLETT: Information as to how the service system is going to work – something as simple as, say, EMDR, which seems to work really well with trauma. The different experiences different people have had – that is why we built the community wellbeing dashboard. Now, internees, after speaking to some of them recently, are saying things like 'We don't like to read big slabs on websites, things like that, because we just can't concentrate' – short, sharp videos about if you do this type of therapy, this is what you can expect. We have spoken to SAFV centre in Geelong about things like that – pulling little videos, giving them information so they are informed and they can start to skill up on what the process is going to be as they get there. There has always been a need for a pre-triage service, but I just think there are some groups in the population – when we rip a band aid off like this, we have got to have a preparedness to have something there at the end of it to catch this. And right now if we are doing an inquiry, does that mean we are alerting more people? Are we ready to deal with that? So having services ready – and there are waiting lists everywhere. Maybe it is a bigger conversation about how we stop the waiting lists, because some of the services they are going for, if you are in regional rural areas, even if you are trying to find them – increasing telehealth and things like that can potentially help, things like that, and supports in schools, if they are in schools.

The CHAIR: Leigh, thank you very much for appearing before the committee today and for your contribution to this inquiry. We greatly appreciate the time and effort that you have taken to prepare your evidence, and we acknowledge the significance of this.

You will be provided with a proof version of today's transcript to check. Verified transcripts will be published on the committee's website. Once again, Leigh, thank you very much for today. I declare this hearing adjourned.

Committee adjourned.