

# TRANSCRIPT

## SELECT COMMITTEE ON THE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE SECTOR IN VICTORIA

### Inquiry into the Early Childhood Education and Care Sector in Victoria

Melbourne – Tuesday 24 February 2026

#### MEMBERS

Anasina Gray-Barberio – Chair

Michael Galea – Deputy Chair

Melina Bath

Georgie Crozier

Jacinta Ermacora

Sarah Mansfield

**WITNESSES**

Pejman Okhovat, Chief Executive Officer and Managing Director, and

Josie King, Chief Legal, Quality and Risk Officer, and Company Secretary, G8 Education Ltd.

**The CHAIR:** Good afternoon, and welcome back. We will now resume the committee's public hearings for the Inquiry into the Early Childhood Education and Care Sector in Victoria.

All evidence taken is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information you provide during the hearing is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you are saying during this hearing, but if you go elsewhere and repeat the same things, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing. Transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee's website.

For the Hansard record, can you please state your name and any organisation you are appearing on behalf of.

**Pejman OKHOVAT:** My name is Pejman Okhovat. I am the Chief Executive Officer of G8 Education.

**Josie KING:** Good afternoon. My name is Josie King. I am the Chief Legal, Quality and Risk Officer, and Company Secretary of G8 Education.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, and welcome. We will now go around the committee members and introduce ourselves. My name is Anasina Gray-Barberio, MP for Northern Metro and Chair of the Select Committee.

**Michael GALEA:** Good afternoon. Michael Galea, Member for South-East Metro and Deputy Chair.

**Georgie CROZIER:** Good afternoon. Georgie Crozier, Member for Southern Metropolitan Region.

**Melina BATH:** Hello. Melina Bath, Eastern Victoria Region.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Sarah Mansfield, Western Victoria Region.

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** And Jacinta Ermacora here online from Warrnambool, Member for Western Victoria Region.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. I would now like to invite you to make an opening statement and ask that you please keep it to a maximum of 8 to 10 minutes to ensure that we have plenty of time for discussion. Thank you.

**Pejman OKHOVAT:** Of course. I would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land and the elders past, present and emerging. Good afternoon, Chair, Deputy Chair and committee members, and thank you for the opportunity to appear before this inquiry. As I stated, my name is Pejman Okhovat. I am the CEO of G8 Education. I am joined by my colleague Josie King today. At G8 Education we have 395 early learning services, including 128 here in Victoria. We employ more than 2900 team members and care for more than 12,000 children each week across Victoria. We are all here today because we share a common goal: a safer environment for Australian children in early childhood education and care. This inquiry exists to examine whether our systems, oversights and safeguards are strong enough to meet those responsibilities.

The AFP gave sobering evidence to the federal Education and Employment References Committee in November last year, stating that the crime online, particularly around child sexual abuse, unfortunately is not getting better in Australia. Also, as noted by ACECQA and the Victorian Commission for Children and Young People and numerous federal state ministers, no provider type is immune to this. We have seen horrifying incidents in out-of-school-hours care, not-for-profit providers and private operators alike. It is incumbent upon all of us – government, regulators and of course providers – to work together to ensure children are safe in every setting.

In July 2025 we learned of the devastating and horrific news that a former educator had been charged with child sex offences in Victoria. While these charges are still being heard by Victorian courts and we are limited in what we can say to ensure that we do not risk justice being achieved for children and families involved, my team and I are horrified by what is alleged to have occurred. Our hearts go out to the children and families involved, and we are truly sorry for the indescribable pain this has caused them. Our focus continues to be to support all those impacted, including families, children and our team members. Our team members have been assisting the Victoria Police, who are working tirelessly to seek justice for our impacted families, and I want to take this moment to acknowledge the extraordinary efforts those law enforcement officials involved have made so far.

We welcome the establishment of the Victorian Early Childhood Regulatory Authority, VECRA, and the additional resources provided to strengthen child safety across the sector. We also acknowledge VECRA's recent communication to the sector regarding a historic incident at Hoppers Crossing. While these incidents occurred two years ago, the circumstances described are deeply concerning and do not reflect the standards that we and our families in our centres expect in the delivery of early childhood education and care. G8 Education continues to highlight the need to harmonise policies, regulations, systems and processes across all government and regulators to restore confidence and strength in child safety outcomes. Urgent and coordinated action is needed now, with the state and federal governments, regulators and of course providers working together to improve the sector.

Today I would like to outline our progress in five focus areas where G8 Education is putting its efforts. Child safety first and always – children's safety and wellbeing are at the heart of everything we do, and we are continuously working to improve our approach to child safety and are safeguarding that culture. We continue to invest in enhanced training for all educators, particularly around safe sleep supervision and mandatory reporting obligations. An important part of child safeguarding is ensuring children have a voice and are supported in their understanding of body safety. We have already implemented body safety programs in our curriculum. We have now commenced our initiatives with Act for Kids, providing protective behaviour training for children, educator training modules, a community of practice for our team and coaching and other resources. We continue to strengthen our child safety culture through our 'safety first and always' value. This value is lived every day in our organisation through our leadership and governance rhythms, our code of conduct, our statement of commitment to child safety and our strong reporting culture, investing in our monitoring and investigation teams and implementing our accountability and consequence framework. We support initiatives that make compliance and safety information more accessible to families, provided these systems are accurate, fair and do not inadvertently cause confusion or distress.

The second area of focus: our educators and workforce. I want to take this opportunity to call out the incredible work of teachers and educators across the early childhood, education and care sector. Their unwavering dedication, professionalism and care, despite the challenges facing our sector, are what give families confidence every day that their children are safe, nurtured and supported. We know that one of the most important things we can do is invest in our teams' capability, including their professional development; safety leadership in every centre; and extra training in safety, supervision and reporting obligations, medical management and food safety. G8 Education was one of the first and very few ECEC providers in Australia to work with the federal government to bring to fruition the multi-employer bargaining process, delivering wage increases across the sector. Whilst we have made progress, we know we can do more and we are committed to doing more.

Around compliance and regulations and reforms, G8 Education is committed to continuously improving its policies and processes as well as improving its educational practices. We have invested in a dedicated ECEC regulatory support and compliance team, who oversee all aspects of G8 compliance. We have also significantly bolstered our independent investigations team and our around-centre support team, who provide operational education, practice, safety and compliance leadership across our network.

We are one of the very few providers who have invested in our own internal audit program. We have doubled the size of our quality assurance partners, auditing every centre at least twice a year in 2026. We have improved our national quality ratings from 86 per cent of our services meeting or exceeding the standards in 2021 to now 99.1 per cent in Victoria and 95 per cent nationally. This now puts G8 at 3 per cent above the Victorian average and 4 per cent above the national average for private providers and at the same level as national not-for-profit operators. But we know we need to do more and remain committed to working with government and regulators to continuously improve all aspects of child safety.

Further investment in innovation and capability – we continue to proactively identify ways to improve safety, compliance and learning. Examples of this include our work with Act for Kids to improve child safeguarding outcomes and team capability and our commitment to invest in controlled use of CCTV, subject to privacy safeguards. We know that while CCTV is not a silver bullet, it strengthens the layers of protection we already have in place, and we continue to work with the federal government on supporting the guidelines and best-practice use of CCTV in early childhood education. We share the same goals as everyone in this room: that every child in Victoria and across Australia has access to safe, high-quality education and care.

Lastly, on transparency and governance, we are very conscious of the responsibility that comes with receiving public funding through the childcare subsidy. As an ASX-listed company, G8 Education discloses information about our operations and is subject to a continuous disclosure regime. Yesterday we reported our annual results outlining the difficult environment across the EC sector and our decision to make some hard choices about impairing the goodwill of our business and not paying any dividends to our shareholders and also pausing the on-market share buyback. Under a governance framework, compliance, safety and quality outcomes are reported directly to the independent board of directors on a monthly basis. Confidence and trust in our sector can only be rebuilt by working together through more transparency and sustained actions. We support evidence-based reforms that are nationally consistent, well sequenced, consultative and capable of delivering real change on the ground. For example, we continue to advocate for workforce screening and employment history for those who work with children and vulnerable Australians across other sectors too.

We look forward to receiving guidance from VECRA regarding the reforms this Parliament has passed and look forward to continuing to collaborate with governments and regulators to ensure all reforms lift standards across Australia. On behalf of G8 Education, thank you again for your time and we are happy to answer any questions now.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much, Mr Okhovat. I will begin proceedings. Speaking of VECRA, I have to say I am quite disturbed to read on the VECRA website that one of your early childhood centres out west is undergoing multiple alleged breaches. There was an incident where a child with diagnosed disabilities exited the service and was unaccounted for for a period of time. That was released by VECRA, the new regulator, appointed by the government. Given all the horrors that we have seen, heard and read about in the last year, exactly how can I take you at face value, with everything you have said about accountability, governance change, child safety and being child centred, when this report has come out, by VECRA, that one of your centres has allowed for a child essentially with diagnosed disability – so their vulnerability is also quite heightened – to be actually found in the middle of a busy road, where there was fast-moving traffic? What do you have to say to that? As the CEO, the buck stops with you in terms of safety. Can the committee hear your response, Mr Okhovat, regarding the statement released by VECRA on their website?

**Pejman OKHOVAT:** Of course, and thank you for that question. Firstly, I would like to reiterate what I said in my statement – that we absolutely are committed to improving our processes and procedures, and child safeguarding is our number one priority. One incident is too many in terms of impact on children. This incident of two years ago that we self-reported to the authorities is, as you mentioned, by VECRA, now in front of a court hearing. We are obliged to ensure that we do not, in any shape or format, say anything or do anything that might jeopardise the outcome of that court hearing, and we are absolutely committed to ensuring that we learn from that isolated incident in our centre and continue to improve. My colleague can perhaps shed some light around some of the aspects of that without jeopardising the specific –

**The CHAIR:** So what exactly have you put into place to ensure that there is no repeat of these sorts of incidents that are putting children with disabilities at higher risk?

**Pejman OKHOVAT:** Of course. Do you want to answer that?

**Josie KING:** Do you want to discuss Hoppers Crossing?

**Pejman OKHOVAT:** Or in general?

**Josie KING:** Or did you want to talk more generally?

**The CHAIR:** This was released by VECRA last month, so what have you –

**Josie KING:** Yes, it relates to an incident from two years ago.

**The CHAIR:** But what have you put in place to ensure that there are no repeats or increased risk of these sorts of incidents? This is very disturbing.

**Josie KING:** Absolutely. We completely agree. In relation to that specific incident, as Mr Okhovat said, it was reported to the department at the time. We met with the department. This event happened in February 2024. We met with the department in June and discussed what had occurred and our own internal investigations. We went through our disciplinary proceedings. The employee who was involved no longer works for us. To sort of step back and look at what we do when incidents of this nature occur, this was a failure of supervision. We had policies, procedures and protocols in place, but like many sectors where you are dependent on your team to actually implement and execute on those policies and procedures, sometimes there are failings –

**The CHAIR:** That is a pretty serious failure, given the child was actually found in the middle of the road. It could have been catastrophic, to be honest.

**Josie KING:** Absolutely, it could have been.

**The CHAIR:** Thankfully it was not. I will move on because we do not have a lot of time and I want to get through a couple of my questions here. Mr Okhovat, I want to come back to you. You put out a statement last year where you revealed that G8 had conducted investigations on Mr Joshua Brown for two incidents. Did you notify any other operators when he was the subject of these investigations? Did you warn any operators regarding the investigation that Mr Brown was subject to?

**Pejman OKHOVAT:** If I go back to the statement that we provided. During the employment of Mr Brown at G8, there were two incidents that were witnessed by our team. They were self-reported by our team to CCYP, the regulators and police on both of those occasions. At the time those investigations concluded and were substantiated, the individual was put on performance improvement plans and further training.

**The CHAIR:** So was that the disciplinary action that was given to Mr Brown?

**Pejman OKHOVAT:** Correct.

**The CHAIR:** Why put him on disciplinary action when he was found being aggressive with children? Why not fire him?

**Pejman OKHOVAT:** At the time when we investigated that situation – and the aggressiveness was shouting at children, which we absolutely do not condone in any shape or form – we put him on appropriate disciplinary levels and provided further coaching and training. The second time this happened we suspended his employment pending further investigation, and the individual then decided to leave our employment after the second incident that took place. Back to your question –

**The CHAIR:** Did he leave, or did he take leave without pay? Did he actually leave your organisation?

**Josie KING:** He resigned. He did resign.

**Pejman OKHOVAT:** He resigned. But I think one thing again, as I mentioned: as this case is before the courts, I am also very duty-bound by the police not to go into too many details, if I may remind the committee –

**The CHAIR:** I am only speaking about what you made publicly available. This is what you made publicly available on your website.

**Pejman OKHOVAT:** Sure. And I am just only referring to what we made publicly available.

**The CHAIR:** So I am not getting into what is currently underway. I am asking you questions based on statements that you put out publicly through the G8 website. I just want to make that clear too.

**Pejman OKHOVAT:** Sure. As we mentioned, we publicly reported those. In these incidents, we publicly noted that they were reported to the regulator, CCYP. The police investigation was taking place and the

disciplinary process handed down, and on the second one he was suspended and the individual then resigned from our employment.

**The CHAIR:** In your statement you actually spoke about how you as an organisation were left to continue investigations. Is that correct at all, or – so after you had ordered it –

**Pejman OKHOVAT:** The process of investigation, as I think has been mentioned by many other people who have provided evidence, is somewhat complicated and can take a long time. But if we take it through the step by step between what we do and what the regulators do, that may shed some light on the matter.

**The CHAIR:** I guess for me it is just understanding what you have done since these events have transpired to ensure, like you said, child safety always.

**Josie KING:** Yes. Perhaps just to go back to your original question, which was around communicating the outcomes of the investigations to subsequent employers, again I think you have heard evidence around the complexity and the legal position of being able to share information. As Mr Okhovat said, this was reported to police. It was reported to CCYP, as was the outcome of the investigation. It is challenging under the current regime for employers to share information around disciplinary outcomes when they have not reached the standard of a criminal finding, which is one of the reasons we have been advocating for clearer and better sharing of information between providers and regulators so that all the pieces of the puzzle are held and able to be communicated and appropriately triangulated. Could I also just comment in relation to Mr Brown: we had no reports internally in respect of any of the allegations of which he has now been charged.

**The CHAIR:** Okay.

**Pejman OKHOVAT:** And if the Chair would like me to address your last question, which was different to the initial question around what we have done since, I am more than happy to go into that if you wish, but if you wish to move on, I am more than happy to be guided by you.

**The CHAIR:** Yes. Because I have run out of time, could you take that on notice?

**Pejman OKHOVAT:** We will take that on notice, absolutely –

**The CHAIR:** That would be really helpful for the committee.

**Pejman OKHOVAT:** because there are many steps that we have taken in improving, one, the transparency of information, the visibility of information, and again, like many others, we have provided evidence, teaching, training and experience and the culture within our organisation. We have reset our expectations, improvement in our recruitment practices, improvement in our onboarding practices and improvement in the ongoing training of our team, partnering with well-recognised organisations like Bravehearts, Act for Kids, providing on-the-ground support for families and our team members and subsequently addressing those issues.

The other thing that, Chair, we have committed to doing, particularly in Victoria after finding out about the Mr Brown case, is we have also committed to doing an independent review of that incident, so all the learnings that we can continue to work on post the police's work and allowing us to conduct our own interview and an investigation fully into the matter. We will provide that on notice.

**The CHAIR:** And will you make that independently?

**Pejman OKHOVAT:** Independent of G8, absolutely.

**The CHAIR:** Are there any plans to make that publicly available once it has all gone through?

**Pejman OKHOVAT:** We will take that on notice and provide that information.

**The CHAIR:** Great. Thank you very much. Mr Galea.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you both for joining us. Mr Okhovat, you would be aware that the Victorian worker registry came into effect last year and the national one will in three days.

**Pejman OKHOVAT:** Yes.

**Michael GALEA:** Prior to this, what sort of registry did you keep internally to keep track of your employees, especially in relation to any flagged reports or issues? Can you talk me through your system?

**Pejman OKHOVAT:** Yes. Just about probably a year and a half or two years ago, as you have mentioned, and as many others have provided evidence, there were many different registries, whether it was working with children, whether it was qualifications or the teacher registry, educator registry, by state. We have complied with all of those during this time. One area in particular where we took specific action ourselves was to record all of the working with children checks, irrespective of their state and jurisdiction, centrally ourselves, so therefore we could be across all of those dates and whether they were in a valid situation or they had been revoked. That is something that we put in place ourselves. Of course we keep a very detailed employment record of everyone, including all their qualifications. And through G8 we have a very established Teach@G8 study pathway by which all their educational programs and professional developments are actually captured by ourselves and go through our own mentoring and coaching facilities, so we are able to capture that in what we call our learning management systems as well as our HR systems. We are able to keep detailed records of people's credentials, work history, what we know of their qualifications and working with children checks.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you. Putting aside what you have just said to the Chair about the independent review that is about to be undertaken, has G8 Education undertaken any internal reviews or had any reviews commissioned into child safety practices in the past few years?

**Josie KING:** Let me answer that if you like, Mr Okhovat.

**Pejman OKHOVAT:** Yes, you can answer that of course.

**Josie KING:** Obviously there has been a great deal of work across the sector, particularly regarding the national child safe principles and child safe organisations. G8 has been working for a number of years on developing its child safe organisation plan and moving towards a position where it would be accredited as a child safe organisation. Some years ago we engaged with EY, who did some work with us in terms of mapping that progress. We have internally developed an action plan against the child safe organisation work. We are currently having our internal audit program, an internal review, which will be reported to the board, which will assess our framework, our policies and our procedures against the national law, the national regulations and the national child safe principles and come up with any recommendations if there are any areas for improvement.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you. Are you in a position to provide those reviews to the committee?

**Josie KING:** No, I do not have them yet. The early ones –

**Michael GALEA:** The ones that you already have?

**Josie KING:** The original one, which was the original plan, is some years old. Let us take that under review.

**Michael GALEA:** If you can take that on notice, I would thank you for that. The child-to-educator ratios – well, I should ask. I assume that you comply with all minimum standards. Do you aim to meet those standards, or do you aim to exceed those ratios?

**Pejman OKHOVAT:** Again, a very good question, Deputy Chair. Firstly, as you said, we absolutely abide by all regulations set for us. A couple of other things I will build on that to provide you with a better explanation.

**Michael GALEA:** I am just going to hold you to a quick answer for me because I have got a few questions.

**Pejman OKHOVAT:** Sure. Of course. Firstly, we absolutely roster our team to ratio by room by child age. We do not roster to under the roof, as some of you might have heard or some may do. A number of our teams in our centres are actually not part of the ratio. Centre managers, by G8 policy, are never rostered as ratio. Administrative resources for some centres that do have them – cooks – those people are never rostered as part of the ratio and they are never employed as part of the ratio. What we do over and above that, Deputy Chair, if there are any circumstances by which we feel our team experience is not where it needs to be, we do go above ratio at times. For example, I can tell you there were probably over 40 of our centres in the last quarter of last year that we were actually spending above ratio in those centres.

**Michael GALEA:** That is 40 in Victoria or –

**Pejman OKHOVAT:** Across the nation. The other thing is the setting for coaching and oversight of middle management. Again, if there are areas where we do know there has been a high churn of the staff – again you would have heard that from many other experts providing evidence that this is one of the most critical aspects to get right – we provide more coaching and middle management, like area managers, practice partners and quality assurance partners where it is required.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you. What percentage of your centre-based staff are casually employed?

**Pejman OKHOVAT:** Casual employees? The number of them would probably be roughly around 1500 out of close to about 8800 employees.

**Michael GALEA:** Happy for you to come back to me with a percentage.

**Pejman OKHOVAT:** Casual staff are about 17 per cent. Just one distinction, Deputy Chair, if I may. That is very different to agency usage. There are three different groupings: agency, which is external hire; casual members, which we hire, and we put every one of those through working with children checks, same recruitment process and same training as our permanent staff; and of course we have our permanent team members too.

**Michael GALEA:** I understand. Thank you. You have told us that 99 per cent of your 128 Victorian centres meet or exceed the National Quality Standard. What is the percentage figure just for those that exceed the NQS?

**Pejman OKHOVAT:** In Victoria? I believe it is close to 11 centres. That would be around 6 per cent, I believe. If I get that wrong, we will make sure we correct that specific percentage for you.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you. It might be slightly higher out of the 128; I will give you that.

**Pejman OKHOVAT:** Maybe your maths is better than mine. Apologies.

**Michael GALEA:** But it is still a fair way lower than what is averaged by the not-for-profit sector. Why do you think the private sector struggles so much with that metric?

**Pejman OKHOVAT:** Maybe joining just a very simple dotted line between one setting and another may not be the most fruitful. I think again you would have heard from many others before me in terms of providing evidence. Number one, it is getting increasingly more difficult for achieving and exceeding. Again, if you look at the ACECQA data, it shows across the nation the level of exceeding across the sector has continued to decline year after year after year, particularly for the last five years. In some of those settings, as I said, it takes a very small percentage difference whether you are achieving meeting or whether you can actually achieve and exceed, which is even harder to get. We absolutely strive towards wanting to get there, and a lot of it comes down to the experience of the team, the longevity of the team and the retention of the team that you can continue to build the capabilities of to improve their practices year after year after year. And we absolutely want to strive towards getting to a better position.

**Michael GALEA:** My time is up, but thank you. The workplace culture element of that is an interesting point. Thank you.

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

**Georgie CROZIER:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you both very much for being before the committee this afternoon. If I could go back to the evidence you provided earlier around the working with children check, I think you said that you put in place your own checks, your own central database. When did you start to do that?

**Pejman OKHOVAT:** About a year and a half ago.

**Georgie CROZIER:** About a year and a half ago. What drove you to do that? Why was that important to you? Did you have concerns around recording that information, or were there issues with potential employees that you had with their working with children checks?

**Pejman OKHOVAT:** It was a number of factors. If I may build on that, back to one of the Chair's questions, since my arrival in G8 just over three years ago there have been a number of areas that myself and my team have tried to improve based on all the learnings that were there previous to us. Visibility and information capture at a large provider we believe is really important. Investing in appropriate systems, technology that provides visibility so therefore you can assess root causes, analyse and understand trends is really important. Up to that time the data were captured predominantly at a state level and in some states the responsibility was actually left to the individual to hold their own. Whereas we felt it was probably very important for a large provider to ensure that we had visibility of the renewal times and if anything was being revoked, rather than leaving it to the employee to tell us something that is going on. So that was one of the key reasons why we wanted to ascertain that we had visibility of those working with children checks: for continuous improvement purposes.

**Georgie CROZIER:** Were you aware of the concerns raised by the Ombudsman in the report that she handed down in 2022?

**Pejman OKHOVAT:** Correct.

**Georgie CROZIER:** When were you aware of that?

**Pejman OKHOVAT:** Well, that was before my time. But since arriving in the sector, I have done my best to assimilate myself with that, and I have got many team members who have been in the sector 10, 15, 20 years.

**Georgie CROZIER:** If I can just go down that line a little bit further, you were well aware of that report's recommendation 1 around improving the working with children check?

**Pejman OKHOVAT:** Yes.

**Georgie CROZIER:** Did your organisation approach government or did you give feedback through the consulting phase to the department?

**Pejman OKHOVAT:** I do not remember that far back. If there was, I am more than happy to look back at that time. But subsequent to that, at every opportunity, whether it has been the Productivity Commission or any other inquiries, any submissions that we have provided to this inquiry, the New South Wales inquiry and the federal Senate inquiry that has been taking place concurrently, one of the key things that we have advocated for has been a national working with children check, not only that but also raising the bar across all the states.

The other really important one that we have advocated for is the employee's work history and where that is captured, particularly around issues of behaviours or disciplinary actions, both substantiated and unsubstantiated, because they often provide a pattern of behaviour that sometimes goes unseen. They are really important areas to be able to triage information, certainly at the authority levels, that can then help providers with not allowing perpetrators to get into early childhood or, for that matter, working with any vulnerable people across Australia.

**Georgie CROZIER:** Certainly. What I am trying to ascertain is: given you had concerns around those particular areas and were putting together your own databases so that you could have that information – you were trying to provide certain systems to protect the children obviously, number one, but the organisation and other staff members around potential perpetrators or others that were not fit for working in this area – I am just concerned that you did that and when you did alert government to it, given this recommendation made by the Ombudsman was ignored by the government and whether that could have been and should have been highlighted sooner given what has occurred in the last 12 months. I am just keen to sort of understand those timelines, if you could.

**Pejman OKHOVAT:** As I said, certainly in my time, at every opportunity we have tried to raise these key issues of harmonisation and a national registry. Again, not only us, but again you would have heard from many peak organisations that we have been part of. I do not have the answer as to why the government has not necessarily reacted in the timeframe from the Ombudsman's report going back many years ago to recent, but we are also at the same time grateful that the journey has started.

I think the other thing that we would urge both federal and state governments to do is to continue on that path and provide better harmonisation of national law regulations across all the states and continue to go down that path and improve the settings by which we can all work together and not allow perpetrators to enter early childhood.

**Georgie CROZIER:** Thank you. You mentioned the registry, and we have heard that as of Friday there will be a dual system operating in Victoria. We understand that there needed to be a registry put in place given what occurred last year, 12 months ago or so. But given the national registry is coming into effect on Friday, the committee has heard that there is no feedback from the Victorian government about when the state one will wind up so that that one takes precedence and is working fully. Have you got any details of that? You have not heard anything either?

**Pejman OKHOVAT:** No, unfortunately we have not. Again, we do appreciate that VECRA has only been established in the recent few months. We are looking forward to hearing from VECRA and the regulator and the government here –

**Georgie CROZIER:** Have you been asking about it, though, given that the –

**Pejman OKHOVAT:** Yes, it has been raised again through many forums and again in our submission. One of the things around harmonising these regulations is really important. The second part again you would have probably heard from others providing evidence is that our own team members' confidence in what they are doing is paramount: making sure that we help our own team members, particularly our centre leadership team, to be able to really embed these changes well and continue to create that culture and the simplicity by which they can implement these and also be given the appropriate settings for them to deliver the appropriate training and embed these changes. It is really critical that we get those right. Sometimes doing them fast, duplicating efforts and complicating an already overcomplicated system has unintended consequences and puts both individuals and organisations at risk.

**Georgie CROZIER:** So really the federal government and state government, you would hope, would be talking to get this sorted sooner than later.

**Pejman OKHOVAT:** We hope so.

**Georgie CROZIER:** Thank you very much.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Dr Mansfield.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Thank you for appearing today and for your submission. I asked this of one of the witnesses earlier today, but in G8 centres are there any financial incentives for directors or managers or further up in the executive parts of the organisation, such as bonuses for those staff?

**Pejman OKHOVAT:** It is a great question. I am happy to answer both the aspects that you asked, if I understood the question well. If I start with the executive team, again we are an ASX-listed organisation. The remuneration of the executive team is always very clearly stipulated in our annual reports, and yes, there are. Again, we publish our annual reports publicly, and the detail of the mechanics of those incentive programs are, as I said, public knowledge. We have actually brought a copy of our annual report that was released to the market yesterday for submission to the committee, if the committee wishes to have that.

If I may now go back to the first part of your question around any incentive programs for our centre leadership team and our middle management team, yes, there are. Our approach to those incentives – again, over the last two or three years we have improved those significantly – is fundamentally based around what we call a balanced scorecard. Our management team – there are five key areas for which there are measurable outcomes that we look for, and it does start with safety and compliance. The second area is around team retention, which again I am sure you have heard from many is one of the most critical aspects of providing safety to children – experience and retention of a good quality team. The third area is around family experience: what are the families actually saying about that specific location, through the voice of families? It is always a system that we have on. You might have heard of it, like an equivalent of an NPS program.

The third area is around the enrolment of children, which we fundamentally believe is about the confidence and the trust that the local community has in each of our centres. One of the five components is a financial metric by which the overall program works.

I would just like to finish by saying that from the executive team all the way down to our centre management team we also have a very important aspect that if there are any serious issues or there is any serious misconduct by any individual, no bonuses will be paid, as a safeguarding.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Okay. If on that balanced scorecard the child safety aspects are not met, does that stop any consideration of the other aspects with respect to a bonus being paid?

**Josie KING:** Yes. I have got it in front of me; it is probably a little easier for me. There are no safety STIPs payable if there is a serious supervision failure or significant harm to children, and then that cascades up to the area managers and the regional managers for that particular centre.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Okay. So effectively if you do not meet that requirement, there is no bonus paid, regardless of how you are achieving on the other aspects?

**Josie KING:** Correct.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** You said that has been an improvement in the last couple of years. When was that system put in place?

**Pejman OKHOVAT:** We started to implement that across 2024 and 2025. There was a different system in 2022–23 when I arrived. But as we learn more about what is important to do, one of the key things in consideration here is: what are the levers you pull trying to encourage the team to do better? You want to make sure you do not have adverse or unintended consequences. One of those that is very much top of mind for us is not to incentivise in any way that the reporting goes, and one thing we have been extremely proud of in our team is a very strong reporting culture. Again, the data – VECRA, or the regulators before VECRA, would show we report everything. One of the biggest things that we encourage in our team is: it does not matter how small it is, you report and we report, irrespective of the severity.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Sorry to interrupt, but is there not a risk with a model that has incentive payments that are linked to safety that you could discourage that? Is that not an argument maybe to remove these incentive payments altogether?

**Josie KING:** That is an interesting point, and we have talked about that at length, because you do not want to discourage reporting, but we believe that there are other compensating controls that counteract that tension. There is always a tension when you have a safety issue, whether it is this sector, whether it is any industry.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** I guess my question is: why do you need the bonuses in the first place?

**Josie KING:** Well, I think it is part of our strategy to recognise and reward our leaders in the centres who are delivering great outcomes for our families and our children.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Okay. I might just move on, given our time. You mentioned before obligations regarding disclosures to shareholders, given you are a publicly listed company. Do you have to disclose breaches of regulations to your shareholders?

**Josie KING:** That is a very interesting question again. At the risk of wanting to explain something you may already know, the continuous disclosure regime which applies to listed companies is complex. Essentially, the test is: is the information material information to an investor when choosing whether to buy or sell shares? Breach data, by and large, would not necessarily ordinarily fall into that category. Of course if there are particularly serious incidents, that may well be information that you would want to disclose. There is also a lot of publicly available information regarding breach data which, as you mentioned, you can see on the regulator websites, like whether there have been enforcement actions taken. In Victoria VECRA will publish actions taken; other states follow similar procedures. So that information is available.

**Pejman OKHOVAT:** The one thing I can add to my colleague's commentary around is that, again, our annual report will show that in a similar way we publish a very balanced scorecard for all our stakeholders to

publicly see, and that does include our National Quality Standard ratings year on year and improvements that we have achieved across those. Under our ESG obligations, the four pillars by which we also have obligations to report are around governance; what we are doing about looking after our team – so from retention, work, health and safety data, metrics and those kinds of things, and we do make those; education and quality – again, we do publish our national quality ratings for all our shareholders and stakeholders to see; and of course our environmental aspects, and do we do publish those to see.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** There is nothing specifically about child safety in any of those reporting requirements.

**Pejman OKHOVAT:** Not currently stipulated by ASIC and the corporate governance Act.

**Josie KING:** Not other than to the extent that with the national quality rating, to be meeting it, you have to meet it in every category, including QA2, which relates to child safety.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Thank you.

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

**Melina BATH:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you very much. I feel like you are being quite straightforward with us today and wanting to be transparent, and I think that is appreciated. With 12,000 children across the Victorian sector and 128 sites or locations – shopfronts, we will say – do you have any other active and ongoing cases of a significant nature, and we might need to define that, that you have had to report in line with child safety standards and the like at the moment?

**Pejman OKHOVAT:** Do you want to?

**Josie KING:** Yes. I am just trying to think about how best to respond to your question. The process that we follow is sort of a triage process. As you know, our team follow the ACECQA decision tree when deciding what is a serious incident, so whether it is an I01. We also have parent complaints, and if they are of a serious nature, they are a C01. We report to the regulator within 24 hours of assessing whether or not the incident or complaint meets that criteria. If it relates to child harm, there is then a period of time to investigate, and we report through the reportable conduct scheme to the CCYP. If you will just bear with me a second, I do have the data on the number of incidents that we have reported.

Sorry, it is in a separate section. But while I am looking for that, I can tell you that around 50 per cent of what gets reported and investigated is generally considered unsubstantiated, and then of the remaining 50 per cent, about half of that meets the reportable conduct threshold and about half of it does not. Where we have substantiated a finding, again around half of those individuals who have been investigated are either terminated or they resign. So that is the flow.

**Pejman OKHOVAT:** The very severe cases may be prosecuted criminally by the police.

**Josie KING:** Aside from Mr Brown, there is one other former employee who is currently being prosecuted by police. It is for an incident that occurred at a centre at Horsham, where the educator was very rough with a child and pushed them forward. The police are prosecuting her, so she is working through that.

**Pejman OKHOVAT:** That went through our team again observing that behaviour by an individual. It was self-reported, the individual was stood down and then the consequence was that because it was so severe the police took action. To build on what my colleague just said, again the ACECQA data that is published is incredibly useful data. If the committee has not come across it, ACECQA at the end of every calendar year publish their data. For example, the 2025 annual report is an incredibly rich source of data that may be useful. What that shows is the nature of early childhood care as a self-reporting system. Ninety-two per cent of what gets reported does not lead to a breach – nationally. It is really important that complexity is understood really well, and that is why we are absolutely committed to continuing to report well. But the statistics, as my colleague shared, are about what we have done, and the seriousness of that across Victoria is what my colleague has shared.

**Melina BATH:** Thank you very much for that. I appreciate that context. We might even seek to get the secretariat to do some homework and look that up. I am going to ask you a question that you sit on the outside of. You run a private, for-profit business –

**Pejman OKHOVAT:** Yes.

**Melina BATH:** a large business. From the education department and from the state-based sector, which you are not a part of, do you feel, do you see, do you hear or do you talk about, with people who have moved between the two, there being adequate standards of self-reporting in there for parents, if they come in, so that their complaint is taken seriously? Can you speak anecdotally about anything on that, or are you comfortable in not? I just want to try and understand. You have been in the sector a long time, and there is a spotlight on the private sector, as there should be, but I also want to understand: is there a culture somewhat of secrecy and removal sometimes of heat from the public sector, in your opinion?

**Pejman OKHOVAT:** I will share my point of view and see if my colleague has got anything further to build on that. The Australian early childhood sector is a mixed model, as you well know. Over the years – particularly over the last decade, decade and a half – the provision of access to families has fundamentally been established by the private sector, so around about 60 to 65 per cent of the places that are available for families to put their children in have come from the private sector. Within that, as you know, again, there are different settings, from out-of-hours care to long day care et cetera et cetera. We genuinely believe that model is a good model. To answer your question on if we think there are differences between how private and public report, we do not have that data. The bit that we advocate for, which we absolutely stand by and is in our submission, is that all of us should be treated the same. All of us should aspire to the same high standards. All of us should be treated fairly and equitably by the standards that both the federal and state governments and the regulators set. We do also acknowledge the fact that that should be at a higher bar, which has been raised, and we work towards that.

**Melina BATH:** Thank you. I appreciate that answer very much.

**Josie KING:** Can I just add one further comment on that?

**Melina BATH:** Yes.

**Josie KING:** I am sure you have seen the ACECQA *NQF Annual Performance Report* for 2025. They have a chapter on incidents and incident reporting, and they make the point that it is actually very hard to compare the rates of reported serious incidents across service types. That goes to your question, I think. They are saying there is potentially over- and under-reporting for a variety of reasons, and they go through some of those reasons. If you are reporting a lot, it could be because you have got lots of issues or it could be because you have really strong and robust reporting mechanisms. On the other hand, if you are not reporting much, it could be because you have great procedures or you are also not reporting because you have got cultural issues or lax processes. They do make the point that the data needs further interrogation, and I think that would be a –

**Melina BATH:** A good recommendation for this committee to be able to actually ascertain the nature of those findings and those understandings. Thank you very much.

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

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** Thank you for being there as the last people for the day. I just want to follow up on Mr Galea's question around the percentage of casuals. You mentioned that you have also got agency staff. What percentage of agency staff do you have?

**Pejman OKHOVAT:** Currently, if I am accurate, it was 0.03 per cent for 2025, and it is virtually zero this year. This is from historical – again, about three years ago it would have been around 4 to 5 per cent, G8's usage, and we have significantly reduced that.

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** Thank you. I want to ask about your organisation's status as an ASX-listed entity. Under that you have a whole range of obligations which you have been talking quite a lot about today, as an ASX-listed, and they are governance obligations and prudential obligations largely focused around investor

confidence and profit, which is a perfectly legitimate motive for any business. I just wonder whether or not the focus on putting the child's interests as paramount in some way creates a conflict, a tension, for your business.

**Pejman OKHOVAT:** Again, a great question, Senator. In short, we do not believe so, and I can talk to a number of things that certainly over the last three years I, my colleagues as the executive team and our board of non-executive directors have done, have committed to doing and will continue to do. Like any organisation, we genuinely believe part of our responsibility is committing to continuously learning and improving all aspects of our organisation. Our board of directors, my team and I take our responsibility across all aspects of our organisation and, as I mentioned, particularly around our ESG responsibilities very, very seriously. A number of things that we have continued to do that show or reflect on our commitment and appetite to continuous improvement is our board continuously gets renewed. That is one. Our board also have access – and they do exercise that – to independent verification of management's ability to uphold the law, the regulation and the compliance of that through independent verification that reports directly to our board of directors. Those independent verifications are not just on our financial matters; they are very much around every aspect of our organisation. At the top of that would be children's safety and protection and compliance with regulations which we abide by.

There are other areas that also we have continued to invest in that show our commitment to child safety. One is investment in technology. We have invested millions of dollars in establishing a system over the last 18 months to two years of having full visibility of all incidents that are recorded and reported within our centres in real time. Our ability then to investigate those and report against those is better than it ever was. We have invested, again, millions of dollars in cybersecurity, which fundamentally is around protecting the privacy and the data that we hold on children and their families and, subsequent to that, continuing to invest in the capability of our team. That is one of the most important things that we cannot forget and I am sure the Senator and committee have heard time and time again.

Team capability, culture by which you cultivate safety, is the bedrock of providing that safe environment for children whilst we support that with processes and systems and tools and technology as overlays to be able to do that. Another example of that would be this year we have increased our what we call quality assurance partners twofold. That is a significant investment that we have undertaken to ensure we are able to, again, audit our centres twice per year. All of those reports then go into improvement. I think, Senator, to answer your question, we believe it should go hand in hand, and I do not think that profit in any shape or form should or can come before children's safety.

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** Thank you. The other question I want to ask you is on your introduction of bonuses – that is since 2024, is that right?

**Pejman OKHOVAT:** No, apologies. If I make one point of clarification, G8 has had incentive programs in the past. What I said was since 2024 we have improved the mechanics and the way in which it works compared to the past.

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** Would you have trend data on more bonuses equalling less negative incidents?

**Pejman OKHOVAT:** No, that is definitely not the case. We have seen evidence that would show that the reporting has gone higher. We actually have better systems in place. But the work we have done, certainly in jurisdictions like Victoria, has seen our breach data come down over the last three to four years by 27 per cent.

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** That was my question. Can you just walk us through how that national register is going to work for you – again, I guess it is more than a cost centre.

**Josie KING:** Because of the sheer number of employees that we have, it is certainly a big undertaking. We have been involved in the pilot, and to some extent I do sympathise for smaller providers who may not have the systems that we have in place. Our team has the data. It is digitised. It is a matter of creating the file that will feed into the system. From that point of view I would not say it is straightforward, but it is manageable for us. The ongoing maintenance of that register and how we will update that, we are still working out the finer details and the logistics of. But again, we have to some extent the scale and the systems that make it a little easier for us to work through that.

**Pejman OKHOVAT:** Did that answer your question?

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** Yes, thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Ms Ermacora. That brings our session to a close. Thank you very much, Mr Okhovat and Ms King, for your evidence today. We really appreciate it. You will receive a copy of the transcript for review in about a week, before it is published on the website, and also some questions on notice.

**Committee adjourned.**