

# 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**

Glen Hurley, Chief Executive Officer, and

Nicola Page, Chief Risk and Quality Officer, Affinity Education Group.

**The CHAIR:** I declare open the committee's public hearings for the Inquiry into the Early Childhood Education and Care Sector in Victoria. Please ensure that mobile phones have been switched to silent and that background noise is minimised.

I would like to begin this hearing by respectfully acknowledging the Aboriginal peoples, the traditional custodians of the various lands we are gathered on today, and pay my respects to their ancestors, elders and families. I particularly welcome any elders or community members who are here today to impart their knowledge of this issue to the committee. I welcome any members of the public in the gallery or watching via live broadcast. I remind those in the room to be respectful of proceedings and to remain silent at all times.

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 say 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, and you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearings. 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?

**Glen HURLEY:** Glen Kelvin Hurley, Affinity Education Group.

**Nicola PAGE:** Nicola Mary Page, Affinity Education Group.

**The CHAIR:** I would now like to introduce myself, and my colleagues on the committee will also introduce themselves. My name is Anasina Gray-Barberio, MP for Northern Metro and Chair of the committee.

**Michael GALEA:** Michael Galea, Deputy Chair of the committee, Member for South-East Metro.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Sarah Mansfield, Member for Western Victoria.

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

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

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** Jacinta Ermacora, Member for Western Victoria.

**The CHAIR:** I would now like to invite you, Mr Hurley, to make any opening remarks but ask that you please keep it to a maximum of 10 minutes to ensure that we have plenty of time for discussion.

**Glen HURLEY:** Thank you, Chair and committee members, for the opportunity to appear here today. I would like to begin by acknowledging the deeply distressing incidents that have occurred across the early childhood and education sector. These have had a serious and lasting impact on children, families, educators and public confidence in a sector that should exist first and foremost to protect and nurture young children. On behalf of Affinity I again apologise for the distress caused by incidents at our centres. I understand the anxiety and concern this has created for families who place their trust in us and for educators who come to work every day committed to children's wellbeing. Like many across the sector, I found it deeply troubling that the actions of a small number of individuals have cast such a shadow over a profession built on care, trust and responsibility.

Last year, 2025, was the lowest point for our sector and for Affinity as a provider of early childhood education and care. We are now working with determination and purpose to ensure we never return to that point. I want to assure all our families, educators and this committee that we recognise the responsibility we have to restore

confidence, and we all know that confidence cannot be restored through words alone. It requires transparency, sustained action and a willingness for accountability. Since becoming Chief Executive Officer last October my focus has been on ensuring the safety and wellbeing of every child in our care. This is and always will be the highest priority. Working closely alongside me has been our new chief compliance and risk officer Nicola Page, who joins me here today. Nothing matters more to us than the care, safety and wellbeing of the children entrusted to us. Every day we are focused on how we best support our educators and strengthen our systems, oversight and culture to provide safe, high-quality care across our centres.

More than 4000 Victorian children and their families rely on Affinity's 52 Victorian centres to deliver safe, nurturing and high-quality care. Currently 98 per cent of our Victorian centres are rated as either meeting or exceeding the National Quality Standard. As one of Australia's larger childcare providers, Affinity has a proud history of expanding access to early learning, developing a high-quality workforce and investing in safety. But it is clear that more must be done not only by us but all operators if we are to ensure consistently high standards and rebuild community confidence. Since early in 2025, Affinity has undertaken a significant program of reform to child safety and quality across our centres. These actions go beyond minimum regulatory requirements and build on existing safeguards that were in place. They include changes to senior leadership and enhanced governance, along with increased investment in compliance, risk and quality functions. To improve supervision we continued the installation of CCTV inside our centres and are eliminating any blind spots. Our employees can now access spaces to securely store their personal devices during their shifts, and we have asked parents to let us know their preferences for who assists their child with toileting or nappy changes.

Underpinning these measures has been a mandatory child safety training program delivered in partnership with Bravehearts, which has been completed by all of our employees. Importantly, each of these initiatives has been supported by consultation with families, staff and regulators. Whilst this work is ongoing, I have been encouraged by early indicators: complaints and breaches have reduced and staff turnover has eased, reflecting a renewed confidence from families. As we continue, we welcome scrutiny and the opportunity to be held to account. We also believe this inquiry presents an important opportunity to drive meaningful, system-wide reform. Affinity supports genuine, evidence-based changes that lift quality and safety outcomes for children and improve standards and conditions for educators. We support the Victorian government's reforms following the rapid child safety review, including its work with the Commonwealth to strengthen national settings. We also commend Victoria's actions to strengthen working with children checks and provide additional resources to the working with children check screening authority.

At the same time, we know there is more work to do to ensure consistent delivery of the highest standards of care across all providers and services. It is critically important that we all succeed. The wellbeing of Australian families and our future prosperity require that there is real choice and dependably high quality when it comes to early childhood education and care, no matter where you live. We are committed to working constructively with you, with regulators and with all stakeholders to raise standards, strengthen confidence and ensure reforms deliver better, safer and more consistent outcomes for children. Our commitment is straightforward: to listen carefully, learn where improvements are needed and act decisively so that quality and safety remain at the heart of everything we do. Thank you, Chair. We welcome your questions.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much, Mr Hurley. I will begin with some questions. You are the CEO as of October 2025, but prior to that you were the senior compliance and safety adviser, correct?

**Glen HURLEY:** Yes, I took on the CEO role. The quality and safety adviser role – I have completed or undertaken that role from July.

**The CHAIR:** How long were you in that role for, Mr Hurley?

**Glen HURLEY:** From July 2025.

**The CHAIR:** Okay. So as part of that role, were you advising your predecessor Mr Hickey of safety, compliance and governance issues within Affinity Education Group?

**Glen HURLEY:** I was providing advice through the board and through the management team and working with the management team.

**The CHAIR:** What did that involve? Operational data would be coming through on your desk with regard to centre compliance and quality assurance; is that right?

**Glen HURLEY:** The function included looking at the governance arrangements that were in place, which included how information related to compliance, worker registrations, safety. All of those aspects of child safety and quality governance came through that function and through to the both the board and the management team.

**The CHAIR:** Effectively then, just based on your response there, safety checks, compliance were all coming through you as we saw last year horrific unravelling of early childhood abuse proliferating and some of that happening in Affinity centres. Were you aware of any of this, or were you specifically brought in as damage control for the Affinity Education Group?

**Glen HURLEY:** I think in regard to the incidents that you described, they are all very serious and troubling matters, and again I want to express how profoundly sorry I am that something like this could occur to any child in our care.

**The CHAIR:** I totally hear that you are sorry; you said that in your opening statement. But I guess what I want to understand, and also for the benefit of the committee, is what you knew when it came to compliance and also ensuring that centres – like you said, 52 centres; that is 4000 Victorian children. You would have had knowledge of centres that were working towards national quality standards, centres that were having issues, correct?

**Glen HURLEY:** Certainly as part of the governance arrangements and then through my oversight, yes.

**The CHAIR:** So what did you do, as part of your function and your advisory role to the board – you sound like you were pretty senior; you also had the power to act and be decisive in your actions – when you were getting these operational reports around centres not meeting standards or having issues around safety and quality?

**Glen HURLEY:** Firstly, 98 per cent of Affinity centres in Victoria are meeting or exceeding the National Quality Standard.

**The CHAIR:** How many are working towards?

**Glen HURLEY:** Two per cent.

**The CHAIR:** So what is that in figures? How many centres is that out of the 52?

**Glen HURLEY:** One.

**The CHAIR:** Just one?

**Glen HURLEY:** Yes.

**The CHAIR:** But we also heard last year that one of your centres in Essendon was the site of some horrific child abuse, as reported. Were you aware of what was going on in the centre in Essendon?

**Glen HURLEY:** Again, our commitment to the provision of safe and quality care in education is a commitment from Affinity to that, and that includes all centres. I think the events that occurred in 2025 are simply not good enough. On joining Affinity and through that time, as I became aware of those events afterwards, that is something that deeply distressed me, and that is why I was motivated and keen to take on the leadership role within Affinity.

**The CHAIR:** And as part of your leadership role, is it similar to your predecessor? Do you have any stocks in Affinity or your owner, Quadrant Private Equity?

**Glen HURLEY:** Let me grab my notes.

**The CHAIR:** Surely you would know, Mr Hurley, whether you have stocks in Affinity Education Group or your owner, Quadrant Private Equity.

**Glen HURLEY:** We have a range of shareholders within Affinity –

**The CHAIR:** So just a yes or no. Do you, as part of your remuneration package, have stocks in Affinity Education Group or Quadrant Private Equity. Yes or no would suffice, Mr Hurley.

**Glen HURLEY:** No, I do not.

**The CHAIR:** No, you do not. What is your base salary?

**Glen HURLEY:** As CEO of a private company, I believe my remuneration is a private matter. But if this information is absolutely required by the committee, I am happy to provide it confidentially, either in camera or as part of supplementary offer process.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Hickey, your predecessor, was very open in the New South Wales parliamentary inquiry about his salary. Now, the reasons for these questions are that obviously Affinity is a for-profit, huge player in the early childhood sector and you have got some really serious distressing issues happening in your centres, so Victorian parents want to know how you are balancing the tensions between safety and profit.

**Glen HURLEY:** Quality and safety are the number one priority of Affinity, and that is exactly how we operate. That is what we are focused on now, and certainly as I have taken over the leadership that has been my absolute priority – to ensure that we are improving on a record that was not good enough historically. We need to do better, and we are. I think some of the investments that we have made in programs that we have put in place –

**The CHAIR:** We will come to that, Mr Hurley, because I am running low on time. How many times has Affinity been subject to emergency action notices?

**Glen HURLEY:** Could you tell me more about the –

**The CHAIR:** With regard to the regulator. The regulator would issue emergency action notices, enforcement notices. It has been reported that the Essendon centre owned by Affinity, where your former educator was alleged to be found to be perpetrating abuse on children, was on a watchlist of the former regulator. What has been done effectively to ensure that the issues of that centre have now been remedied?

**Glen HURLEY:** I completely agree that the performance of those centres was not good enough previously. Since coming into the leadership role I have absolutely focused on improving the safety and quality of provision of services, including in Essendon, the centre.

**The CHAIR:** And where is that centre rated now according to the National Quality Standard? Is that at ‘meeting’ or –

**Glen HURLEY:** It is at ‘meeting’.

**The CHAIR:** It really should be at ‘exceeding’, right? That is really the top benchmark, so if you were serious about purpose and determination, you would be making every effort to ensure that all your centres under your watch are exceeding. Correct?

**Glen HURLEY:** Yes, 98 per cent of our centres are meeting or exceeding. We absolutely aspire for all of our centres to be in that ‘exceeding’ rating.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Mr Hurley. My time has finished, so I will pass over to Ms Crozier.

**Georgie CROZIER:** Thank you very much, Chair, and thank you, Mr Hurley and Ms Page, for being before us this morning and your commitment to the early education sector and your opening comments. Mr Hurley, you said you had the quality assurance role –

**Glen HURLEY:** Advisory role.

**Georgie CROZIER:** advisory role, thank you – in July of 2025. Were you or your predecessors aware of the Ombudsman’s report of September 2022?

**Glen HURLEY:** I am not aware of it. I cannot talk on behalf of my predecessor.

**Georgie CROZIER:** So at the Affinity group – the Ombudsman’s report was on the investigation into a former youth worker’s unauthorised access to private information about children, and in it one of the recommendations made was for the government to strengthen the working with children check. You were not aware of that recommendation? Or had anyone in your group spoken about that recommendation made?

**Glen HURLEY:** Certainly strengthening working with children checks in terms of the system, yes absolutely, it is a priority. And I think in terms of – what we were doing internally within Affinity was focusing in and around the recruitment process and the checks and balances, including the working with children checks and how we were working with those in terms of providing the right information and making sure, through our recruitment process, that no-one would enter our centres if they did not have a working with children check.

**Georgie CROZIER:** So the process that you described just then, was that the process that was being undertaken or is that the process that is undertaken now?

**Glen HURLEY:** No, that is the process that is undertaken. So in essence, the recruitment process for all educators and staff is a multistage employment process. It starts with a receipt and review of the person’s resume by our central resourcing team, and that looks at their suitability, or the person’s suitability, for the role that they have applied for – and this is a central resourcing team with expertise in doing this day in, day out.

The next stage of the process is a phone screening from the same central team, where they interview the person to make sure that that résumé and information there is as it seems. So they are corroborating as they go. If that gate or the person works their way through, there are checks of prohibition registers, a national police check to see that is in place, a working with children check and then also drivers licence and birth certificate to validate that person and their credentials. From that point there is also a validation of qualifications to make sure, if they are a diploma- or tertiary-qualified person, that they meet legal and regulatory requirements.

At that stage, if all is going well in terms of the person’s application, the centre-based team, particularly the centre manager, who is the nominated supervisor, would undertake a face-to-face interview with the candidate. The questions do go through a standard interview guide across every centre, and those interview questions relate to previous disciplinary actions, places of work, knowledge questions related to the National Quality Standard, safety questions and the early learning framework. So that is very much that interaction with the centres.

**Georgie CROZIER:** How long has that process that you have just outlined to the committee been in place for?

**Glen HURLEY:** That has been in place since 2023. The remaining part of that process from 2023 – and then I will talk to the enhancements that were made through 2025 – were reference checks in writing from the last two employers and supervisors. If those work through and the applicant continues to have interest, we then offer employment to that person at that point.

**Georgie CROZIER:** Clearly at the time that this report was done there were concerns around the working with children check, and the government did not take up that recommendation at the time. It took until the serious allegations and incidents occurred that the government acted. Do you think your process would have benefited if the government had done more with the working with children check as outlined by the Ombudsman?

**Glen HURLEY:** Certainly one of our recommendations in the submission is that the working with children checks and systems and coordination of those across the different bodies that play into that and providers are strengthened as a safeguard for all. So yes, we would definitely be supportive and are supportive of greater checks and balances and greater coordination of information on bad actors or incidents that could relate to bad action that feed into that system.

**Georgie CROZIER:** What does that coordination look like that you just spoke of?

**Glen HURLEY:** I think allegations of any type of safety-based concern or any type of physical abuse must be reported – and they are – through to the bodies, which include two at the moment. That I think is something

that has been a focus at the moment, and that is certainly something that we are striving for continually, to make sure that all allegations within our centre are raised and put through, particularly if people have concerns and might go, 'I'm not sure if this is right.' We have certainly run an ongoing campaign and communications on 'see something, say something' and then feeding that into our incident reporting system. I think that is a big piece that then makes its way through to the regulator. For us at that time we investigate and provide the names of the individuals through to the regulator – it is different under different jurisdictions. That is I think a really encouraging piece.

**Georgie CROZIER:** Is that a problem, the different jurisdictions, in terms of being able to coordinate and provide that information back?

**Glen HURLEY:** It is nationally. In Victoria it is moving in terms of where that reporting goes to, but we certainly have worked with CCYP here in Victoria and the regulator to provide that information. I think the other piece of that is the register. That has been in place for some time here in Victoria and now will become a national register, where we provide details of every employee, their qualifications and a significant amount of information every fortnight to the regulator to provide that sort of greater information for them to act.

**Georgie CROZIER:** Thank you.

**Glen HURLEY:** Anything that you would like to add?

**Nicola PAGE:** Thanks, Mr Hurley. Firstly, I would like to apologise for distressing incidents that have occurred. No family should ever have to go through that. These incidents are really distressing, and there is definitely more we need to do as an organisation and as a sector. On incident reporting, as Mr Hurley mentioned, we strive for a good reporting culture. We encourage reporting. We encourage our centres to report incidents within 12 hours, and then we can act quickly and put in actions as needed. We report to the various regulators in line with timeframes, and we really encourage our centre staff to feel comfortable with reporting to drive that continuous improvement cycle.

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

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Ms Crozier. I am now going to hand it over to our Deputy Chair, Mr Galea.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you, both, for joining us. Mr Hurley, your statement on page 5, says, 'Running a sustainable, profitable business does not come at the cost of quality care'. We have had evidence from the Department of Education that just 9.7 per cent of privately run childcare centres are exceeding the NQS standards, compared to 42.8 per cent of not-for-profit centres. How do you compare your statement with the staggering difference in outcomes seen between profit and non-profit centres?

**Glen HURLEY:** Well, I think, as I have talked about before, our number one priority is safe, reliable and high-quality care and education. That is the primary reason that we exist. As I said, we also aspire to be and have exceeding centres, and we will continue to do that. And the 98 per cent of our centres that are meeting and exceeding do meet –

**Michael GALEA:** I would love to drill down on that, actually, the 98 per cent.

**Glen HURLEY:** Sure.

**Michael GALEA:** That includes meeting and exceeding – what percentage are exceeding?

**Nicola PAGE:** Six per cent.

**Glen HURLEY:** Six per cent.

**Michael GALEA:** Six per cent. So it is actually less than the average in the for-profit sector; is that correct? Would you agree with that statement?

**Glen HURLEY:** I do not have that information in front of me.

**Michael GALEA:** Okay. From the evidence that we have from the department – I will use rounded figures – 10 per cent of the private sector centres are exceeding, compared to 43 per cent of the public sector. Your centres are at 6 per cent, but you are telling this committee that running your business profitably does not come at the cost of quality care. What has gone wrong? You are saying the right things – the ambitions that you want and you aspire to. Clearly something is not working. That is a significant difference. If you are at 6 per cent when the average for your sector is 10 per cent, and well below other services, how do you explain that?

**Glen HURLEY:** Well, again, we have 98 per cent of the centres meeting and exceeding. We have talked about the 6 per cent. We do not see that our status, in terms of our for-profit status, is a driver in quality provision. It is certainly something, in terms of the sustainability of our business, in terms of how we are able to invest in people, in workforce, that means that we can continue to grow.

**Michael GALEA:** If profit is not the reason, what is the reason?

**Glen HURLEY:** The reason is safe and high-quality education and care.

**Michael GALEA:** The reason why you are not meeting those same outcomes that the not-for-profit sector is, what is the reason if it is not profit?

**Glen HURLEY:** I agree that we need to be doing better in this, and certainly in terms of where I sit and what our motivation is of the new leadership team, that is to take the organisation to a place where we are at the same level as everybody else in terms of sector and industry averages, and then do better again. That is certainly the aspiration of the current leadership group.

**Michael GALEA:** And by aspiring to meet and exceed the National Quality Standard, would you accept and agree that they are an appropriate assessment of quality in the sector?

**Glen HURLEY:** I certainly think where we sit today that the National Quality Standard is the way to measure performance in quality, yes.

**Michael GALEA:** Do you believe in transparency with prospective parents about your centres – which are and are not meeting or exceeding the NQF standards?

**Glen HURLEY:** Yes, we do.

**Michael GALEA:** And I understand it is a legislative requirement that your outcome is published on the front of each centre. I notice from the websites from your centres in Victoria – I have looked at not every one but quite a lot of them, and I cannot see on any of them – any indication of their NQF score. Is there a reason why you are not being transparent with parents on the website when they go to look at your services?

**Glen HURLEY:** Our individual website?

**Michael GALEA:** Your individual service websites.

**Glen HURLEY:** Sorry, just to be clear, are you talking Starting Blocks or are you talking the Affinity website?

**Michael GALEA:** On your Affinity website you can click through to each individual centre in Victoria, and on each one of them that I have looked at there is no indication at all. There is lots of talk about safety, but there is nothing at all that outlines whether that centre is meeting the NQF standards.

**Glen HURLEY:** Sure. Invariably what we do is refer people to Starting Blocks, which is the government-run website. I think that has been our primary position. So yes, that is it. We will in essence take that on board, because I take your point on transparency of information at the time when people are looking for centres if they do go to our website. That is an important spot.

**Michael GALEA:** And in light of the fact that you have said that you do not just want to meet the standards but you want to exceed those minimum requirements, would that be an area where you could perhaps be more transparent with prospective parents?

**Glen HURLEY:** Yes.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you. In relation to the recommendation of Victoria's rapid review to change the national law, which now has been adopted, as you would be aware, to make the safety, rights and best interests of children the paramount consideration, do you support these changes made under the national law?

**Glen HURLEY:** Yes.

**Michael GALEA:** And how can you demonstrate to this committee that being a for-profit provider is not going to interfere with your delivery of that outcome or that target?

**Glen HURLEY:** It certainly is not. I mean, some of the changes that we have made in the last six months to support the paramountcy principle are absolutely in line with this. We have added an enhanced governance process in terms of a safety and quality board subcommittee, and all of our internal meetings within the organisation now lead with child safety and child quality outcomes as a primary element of that. I also think our commitment and the reinvestment that we have continued to make over the last three years and will continue into the future are good examples of our commitment to having a sustainable sector or a sustainable provider. We have introduced a suite of measures –

**Michael GALEA:** I will just cut you off there – apologies – because I am short of time. The new requirements for a workforce register have obviously come in, and I expect that you would tell us that you are being compliant with that. What were your compliance activities across your centres in Victoria prior to these standards coming in? Prior to the new register coming in, how were you keeping track of your workforce, and were you doing it adequately?

**Glen HURLEY:** There was a register that existed in Victoria prior to the national one, so we had continued to do that. Our recruitment process was strengthened and enhanced around picking up a greater focus on safety, and so they were real enhancements that we made to that workforce piece. So yes, we absolutely support the register and what its intent is, particularly around the regulatory piece, which supports our own internal monitoring and management practices of staff oversight across our centres here in Victoria.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you. Thank you, Chair.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Mr Galea. Thank you, Dr Mansfield.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Thank you. Thank you for appearing today and for your submission. I am just curious: have you met with the regulator, VECRA?

**Glen HURLEY:** Yes.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** And how often have you met them?

**Glen HURLEY:** We met with VECRA last week.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Okay. Had you met with VECRA prior to that?

**Glen HURLEY:** Since coming into my role, I sent a letter to the former regulator and let them know that I was appointed and there was an open invitation to meet. Obviously there was a significant amount of work for the regulator in that time to be ready to become independent. We welcomed our first meeting with VECRA. Nicola, our chairman and I met with the interim regulator and the CEO, and it was very clear to us what both VECRA's and the minister's expectations on Affinity are into the future and for all providers.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Do you have data here about the rate of regulatory breaches at your Victorian centres?

**Glen HURLEY:** We do not provide a year by year or state breakdown of compliance actions externally. The individual regulatory outcomes involve context-specific considerations that are not accurately reflected in summary figures. As I have talked about, 98 per cent of our centres are now rated as meeting or exceeding the NQS, which is in line with sector averages or slightly higher nationally. But to the point that has been made, we are aspiring to lift the number of centres that are exceeding, and we have continued to –

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Sorry. I appreciate that response. So you are saying that you do not provide any public information about regulatory breaches, just to confirm that?

**Glen HURLEY:** The regulatory breaches that are provided are available on StartingBlocks.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Okay. But you do not provide any state-based annual figures about breaches?

**Glen HURLEY:** No, we do not.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Okay. Previously you were talking about improving transparency. You have said it is because they are context-specific, but even an aggregate indication of these breaches is not available?

**Glen HURLEY:** I do not have that data here in front of me. I can take it on notice.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** That would be great. Thank you. I guess part of the reason for asking is that we know that in New South Wales, through their inquiry and the documents process there, it was revealed that Affinity centres had a rate of breaches that was 30 per cent higher than the state average and that actually increased to 70 per cent when Quadrant took over ownership. Do you know if there has been any change in the rate of breaches in Victoria since Quadrant took ownership of Affinity?

**Glen HURLEY:** I cannot speak to rate of breaches. What I can say is that the rate of breaches that you described in New South Wales and our performance overall was not good enough. We are changing, and we are working very hard every day to ensure that we are reducing those breaches. We will continue to do that through a range of measures that we have talked about, including the mandatory training that we have introduced through Bravehearts and the installation of CCTV in our centres, and we are participating in the national assessment process under the federal government approach there as well.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Thank you. I appreciate all of those efforts that you are making. Sorry to rush you; we only get a limited amount of time. If you could provide some data on the regulatory breaches and the rate of those, that would be great. I am also wondering whether Affinity Education Group has any sort of financial incentive structure for staff or managers – bonuses or the like?

**Glen HURLEY:** We have a retention bonus, on tenure, for our centre managers that exists. That is not linked to financial KPIs; that is strongly linked to quality and safety outcomes, which are what we drive each and every day.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Are there any other financial incentives?

**Glen HURLEY:** At an organisational level – is that what you –

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Yes, or for staff or managers at individual centres.

**Glen HURLEY:** That is the individual manager centre incentive structure. It is a tenure-based reward.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Are there links to anything other than tenure?

**Glen HURLEY:** No.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Are there any financial incentives for occupancy rates, for example?

**Glen HURLEY:** No.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Are there any other bonuses or is anything offered to anyone, from the centre managers down to the staff or up to executive level, related to occupancy or the number of enrolments?

**Glen HURLEY:** Certainly across the organisation there are a number of KPIs that exist – those start with achieving quality and safety outcomes – and there are a range of other metrics, as you would see in other organisations, related to staff and also in regard to accessibility, which is occupancy. What I will stress is that the safety and quality gates must be met in order for any of those incentives to be unlocked.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Has that always been the case?

**Glen HURLEY:** Yes. What I can talk to is what I have in place as my incentive.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Yes. Prior to you coming into this role, has it always been the case at Affinity that safety and quality standards had to be met before any other financial incentives were offered?

**Glen HURLEY:** I cannot talk to prior –

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** You were working at Affinity.

**Glen HURLEY:** I was in an advisory role prior to, so I was not part of any incentive structures. From July to October I was there on an advisory and consultancy basis. What I can say is what I have said now in terms of quality and safety being the main gates for any incentives to be unlocked or for anything to occur.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Are you able to take on notice, perhaps, what incentive structures existed prior to you taking on leadership at Affinity?

**Glen HURLEY:** Sure.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Thank you. I am just wanting to understand: with respect to staffing numbers, what are your requirements around ensuring adequate staffing numbers at centres?

**Glen HURLEY:** There are ratios that exist in all centres, that are legislated, and they exist by room and by age group. We roster to those legislative requirements as a base, and we have checks and balances that exist in and around those to make sure that those are met. In the instance, either through centre layout or for other requirements, we roster over and above those ratio requirements based on the operational needs, which clearly include safety.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Thank you. That is my time.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Dr Mansfield. Thank you, Ms Bath.

**Melina BATH:** Thanks, Chair. Thank you for appearing before us today. Can you just walk back – and I am going to say Mr Brown's name, because it is in the public domain. Did Mr Brown go through all of those applicant processes – résumé, phone screening, national police check, working with children check validation, qualifications, face-to-face et cetera? Is that the system that you went through to hire that person?

**Glen HURLEY:** Correct.

**Melina BATH:** Thank you. And at that time there were no flags that you came across – all was in order in order to provide an offer of employment?

**Glen HURLEY:** Again, that process was in place, and those processes were worked through, like for all employees, who would have walked through that process to be offered employment and to take employment.

**Melina BATH:** In terms of working with children checks, there has been a great deal of discussion in previous reports and certainly in the public domain and Parliament. In relation to the working with children check system, in terms of providing that real-time risk information to employers, and given that we have got people under investigation, what can be improved in that system, what are you recommending and what has been the gap from a state government point of view?

**Glen HURLEY:** We are certainly supportive of increased resourcing in that area to make sure that information that comes through from the various reporting agencies is collected and collated by the regulatory authorities and that where there are flags that may come through they are then put back to providers, which would indicate a potential bad actor as a flag for individual providers. That to me, in line and in sync with a very solid reporting process of allegations, is a key element that we need to continue to work hard on together to make sure that where individuals may have a record or a number of items that are flags against them, where things do not quite add up, those items are collated and played back to providers in order to take action. But that is on top of stringent processes that each provider must have at both the entry point into the organisation and on an ongoing basis to remove it. From my point of view, we have zero tolerance of those incidents, we take all allegations very seriously and, where required, we do take action and remove people from the environment.

**Melina BATH:** Moving forward, does Affinity consider the working with children check system sufficient as a primary tool, or has this Mr Brown incident exposed the need for additional internal safeguards beyond statutory checks?

**Glen HURLEY:** I think the current work with working with children checks, the system of a national register that provides information on individual educators, used together in a coordinated fashion will start to strengthen the system around safety here in Victoria.

**Melina BATH:** If there is a red flag, we will say, how is that escalated? Who sees that first in Affinity? What does that look like?

**Glen HURLEY:** I will hand over to Nicola to describe the process.

**Nicola PAGE:** When an incident is first identified, it is at a centre level, and the centre must report on our system. We have a system that records all incidents, and those incidents are captured in the system. They go through to a regulatory compliance team or an incident support team that reviews those incidents. Firstly, they support the centre with some immediate corrective actions. They determine if the incident is required to be reported to the regulator, other authorities or maybe police, depending on the seriousness of the incident.

**Melina BATH:** I am going to just jump in then. At what point? What is a trigger? You have got to make a decision at the centre level. What is a trigger?

**Nicola PAGE:** We encourage reporting of all incidents. Really that is our process. Back to what I mentioned earlier on with that 'see something, say something' process, we really strive for that strong reporting culture. If centres are reporting everything, then we capture them all centrally.

**Melina BATH:** Thank you. Does Affinity believe working with children check authorities should adopt continuous monitoring similar to that with, say, criminal history checks? Is that something that you feel would tighten the system?

**Glen HURLEY:** Yes, because I think the work that can be done on the employment of a person is important, which I have talked about. But certainly the ongoing monitoring and changing status of that are important, as flags might come through to the regulatory authority for an individual working at another centre that might be under some form of disciplinary review investigation or in the process. I understand we need to ensure that we provide the right process for every person that is undergoing the investigation. It is also paramount for us to make sure in those instances that we can understand if that person may pose some form of safety risk to any of our children and, at that point, given that information, we would have zero tolerance for that and we would have the person outside of and not working in the centre.

**Melina BATH:** So without putting words into your mouth, you felt that at this time over the period prior to Mr Brown, your system, to your knowledge, was working reasonably, was working effectively and you were going through a process? I am not putting words into your mouth. Is that what you feel?

**Glen HURLEY:** We certainly had a thorough multistage recruitment process in place. In 2025 we enhanced that process –

**Melina BATH:** Off the back of this horrendous situation?

**Glen HURLEY:** Yes, with a greater focus on safety and checks and balances in there.

**Melina BATH:** Yes. So now that the system has been identified as having major gaps in it, are you considering or have you implemented any additional checks and balances within your own internal organisation to address the vulnerabilities that we have seen in the working with children system?

**Glen HURLEY:** Certainly from our point of view, if I start with the recruitment process again, we implemented revised interview guides that had greater focus on safety in terms of the questions, so that was definitely enhanced. We also made sure as we were doing reference checks that both written and verbal corroboration of that occurred with a greater experienced resourcing team centrally. So I think they are certainly things that we did. We also introduced the mandatory child safety training in partnership with Bravehearts, which really is for everybody very important to understand behaviours and patterns of behaviour that might be

identified within a centre or beyond that, because there is also the program for managers in terms of managing the environment. They are really key parts of what we would consider our overall safety system in this instance. So I think we have certainly implemented a wide range of measures. It is not over yet, because we also continue to expand CCTV in all of our centres to make sure that we are providing a deterrent for those, and also a way for us to understand incidents that occur as well.

**Nicola PAGE:** If I may add, if that is okay –

**The CHAIR:** Just quickly, Ms Page, because we are running behind time.

**Nicola PAGE:** Sorry, just quickly, as mentioned before, that increased focus on reporting is critical to really have that non-blame culture and drive that continuous improvement cycle. So that ‘see something, say something’ campaign that I mentioned earlier – we have policies that mandate that incidents must be logged to our internal reporting system within 12 hours to ensure we have that kind of rapid internal awareness and response to those incidents. We also have a whistleblower policy, and we encourage – if people do not feel confident or comfortable to go through that process, they can also go through the whistleblower process, which is a confidential process. And then with our incident reporting or other events reporting, that is reported to our board monthly. So at the highest level we have that oversight and accountability as well.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Thank you, Ms Bath. I will hand over to Ms Ermacora, who is joining us online.

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** Thank you, Chair, and thanks for coming to the hearing. I just want to start with a broad question around the Victorian government’s early childhood regulator. That has been changed to ensure that the regulator is now independent. Also there has been additional resourcing for authorised officers. Does your organisation support those changes, and how will they help you?

**Glen HURLEY:** We are supportive of an independent regulator, yes. We believe that moving to a visit for every service within Victoria annually is an important step that needs to be taken to monitor the safety and quality of all centres in Victoria. I think in different industries and sectors where that has occurred that has certainly helped. That monitoring practice has certainly helped with public confidence in the implementation of regulation – that the regulator is visiting every centre every year as a minimum. Certainly I think we also support regulation that focuses on safety and quality and those core issues to lift the overall standards for all, and certainly as I have said, that is my focus, Nicola’s focus and the team’s focus each day.

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** Thank you. I just want to go to workplace culture right down at the centre level. There has been a recommendation in the rapid review to give early childhood workers the confidence to raise concerns. But I just want to ask what particular behaviour. You mentioned it is within 12 hours in your organisation to report an incident, and you have used words like ‘reporting incidents’, ‘zero tolerance’, ‘investigate’, ‘safety’ and ‘checks and balances in your governance restructure’. But what are the particular behaviours that your staff are encouraged to use and the particular behaviours that they are not, which might be signals? There have not really been specifics about that.

**Nicola PAGE:** I am happy to answer this one. In response to your question, it is really important that our staff are aware of what some of those particular behaviours they should be aware of are. I might just go back. The Bravehearts training, which Mr Hurley spoke about, was critical to ensure our people know what some of those behaviours might be, such as, firstly, knowing that incidents need to be reported straightaway. Just around incident disclosure and reporting it, it is really critical that we really drive that incident reporting culture. But then just on those particular things – things perhaps like grooming or behaviours in children that may be unusual or inappropriate – those are the types of things that are covered in that training so that our staff know when they need to report.

**Glen HURLEY:** I might add as well, if I can. That could be anything like a change in behaviour from a child that is reported from a family member. That would go to the educator. That could be the educators observing a change in usual patterns of behaviour of that child. It could also be an instance of inappropriate discipline or rough handling down to that level that they might observe. So it is very much a whole range of those items that traverse that safe and appropriate provision of early childhood education that we are enhancing and really bringing to the fore in that.

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** We all acknowledge that the ingredients to good care are relational, human and cultural, and the ingredients to abusive care are also being relational. So how do you strengthen your culture at that relational level whilst achieving all of these regulatory, almost intimidating, assurances? I am trying to understand where the mismatch is.

**Glen HURLEY:** Certainly as we looked at the Bravehearts training through the organisation, at the same time, to this very point, we needed to provide everybody that worked in that very important child-to-educator interaction the way of what are the positive interactions that we could encourage. Through 2025, in partnership with Phoenix, we ran two workshops for every centre, so two 2-hour workshops, that were about what a positive interaction with a child looks like. It could be the boundaries – or it is the boundaries that exist around that in terms of how to interact with a child positively, right through to what the overall community and culture looks like in that centre, so you do have positive interactions built off a strong, safe culture. We had over 95 per cent of our centre-based teams attend those workshops, which were focused on nurturing positive interactions with children.

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** How have you created supportive cultures to encourage that?

**Glen HURLEY:** The centre manager is the absolute most important person in the organisation for us in terms of being able to manage and develop those relationships in the centre and being able to maintain a strong team. So we focus heavily through regular interactions with the leadership team to make sure, as they require all the elements that they need for running a safe and high-quality centre, that they get those. It has been very much about creating and focusing on a culture that serves the centre leadership team and the centre managers and that then serve the teams within it to make sure that we have a strong relationship with families and children in that way. I have talked a lot about what we have been doing centrally and how that plays out at an organisational level, but we are and I am in particular very much committed to putting the children at the absolute centre of what we do, and those that are closest to them are where the absolute support needs to be.

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** Thank you. My time is up.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Ms Ermacora. Thank you very much, Mr Hurley and Ms Page, for your contributions and your evidence to the committee today. You will receive a copy of the transcript for review in about a week's time before it is published on the website, and also take note that there are some questions on notice that committee members have requested.

We will now take a very short break, and we will be back soon with our next witness.

**Witnesses withdrew.**