

# 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**

Dr Ros Baxter, Chief Executive Officer, and

Kelly Jebb, Head, Social Policy, Goodstart Early Learning.

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

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

**Ros BAXTER:** Dr Ros Baxter, CEO of Goodstart Early Learning.

**Kelly JEBB:** Kelly Jebb, Head of Social Policy, Goodstart Early Learning.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. We are now going to introduce ourselves, the members of the committee. My name is Anasina Gray-Barberio. I am MP for Northern Metro and Chair of the select committee.

**Michael GALEA:** Good morning. Michael Galea, Deputy Chair, Member for South-Eastern Metro.

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

**Melina BATH:** Melina Bath, good morning, Eastern Victoria Region. And Georgie Crozier, Southern Metropolitan, I believe.

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** Jacinta Ermacora, Member for Western Victoria Region, online, as you are.

**The CHAIR:** I would now like to invite you to make some opening remarks and ask that if you could please keep it to a minimum of 8 to 10 minutes. Thank you.

**Ros BAXTER:** Thank you, Chair. I just want to start by saying we are always very grateful at Goodstart for the opportunity to have a conversation with MPs and policymakers, so thanks for the opportunity. As you know, Goodstart is the largest provider of early learning in Australia. We have over 670 centres supporting almost 65,000 children from 53,000 families in Victoria alone. We have teachers across, as of yesterday, 171 centres. We are the state's largest provider of kindergarten programs, and on that, I really want to acknowledge Victoria's success as the state with the highest proportion of children who attend kindy for 600 hours in the year before school and the highest participation rate of three-year-olds. We have been really proud to partner with you on that work, and two weeks ago we opened our first state-funded kindergarten at Glengala.

I really want to acknowledge before we start that Victoria has really been the leading state in Australia in early childhood education and care policy. You make the biggest investments in pre-school workforce and quality improvement. You have the most up-to-date quality assessments, so you have 89 per cent assessed in the last three years as against 63 per cent in the rest of Australia. You have the lowest level of centres that are working towards the National Quality Standard of any state, and you have the lowest level of staffing waivers of any state. I think it is 0.8 per cent as against about 6 per cent nationally.

Sadly, of course the events of the last year have highlighted the many places where governments and early learning providers can both do better – where we can do better together. Our hearts go out to the families and children who have been affected in the events of the last year and beyond. We know that keeping children safe is our most paramount consideration, and it certainly is ours at Goodstart. We want to acknowledge the massive

strides Victoria has already taken towards a safer system, including through the rapid review and associated work. We welcome the establishment of a stronger, better resourced independent regulatory authority, the strengthening of working with children checks, which we have spoken to Victoria at some length about and also the bringing together of your reportable conduct scheme and your working with children check scheme under a strengthened social services regulator. We also know that state and federal education ministers have agreed to a suite of national child safety reforms, and many of those are things that we at Goodstart have been advocating for for some time. For us at Goodstart there is no higher value than the safety of children in our care. We are right now in the process of implementing the safety reforms that have been agreed to by government, most of which take effect this week on 27 February. But like most other high-quality not-for-profits, we have worked hard over many years to embed a child safe culture in our centres.

At Goodstart we call our policy ‘look, do, tell’. We encourage educators to constantly scan for things that may put children at risk, to act immediately and to then report that. We know that we are not perfect, but we believe that we are the best at getting better, and we have a commitment to continuous improvement, drawing on our data from our very substantial centre and network footprint. We know the time it takes to get centres where you need them to be and to give quality to the children and families who rely on them. The key factor for us is workforce – how stable it is, how capable, how they work together as a team – and that is all the single biggest cost. So for us at Goodstart more than 70 per cent of our revenue goes to our workforce and to developing and caring for them. We support the introduction of mandatory child safe training, but I do acknowledge that that comes with some very substantial costs.

I just want to finish by summarising some of the key changes we are still seeking, and we are very keen to work with all governments, including the Victorian government, on those reforms. In particular, number one for us is that we strongly believe we need a national working with children check system to close the loopholes that we currently see. The announcements about harmonisation we believe will not be enough until we have a national working with children check. The Victorian working with children check needs to be strengthened. It needs to place an onus on employers to link employees and volunteers, not the other way around. We believe that the system is open to risk if offenders can choose whether to list an employer on their working with children check. It also means that your notification system will not work if there is no link to an organisation.

Secondly, the Victorian system is great in that it has all the critical elements of a safe system. It has got an independent regulator, mandatory child safe principles, a reportable conduct scheme and a working with children check. But we think there is more to be done to make sure those elements talk to each other well enough and also talk to Victorian police and the child safety department. We think there need to be really clear lines of automated reporting across agencies, not just to and from early learning providers, so that people can make timely decisions to keep children safe.

Thirdly, we think that labour hire agencies need to be able to access the NQAITS – the National Quality Agenda IT System – so they can check if potential agency staff are listed on the prohibited persons register. This was a recommendation of the national child safety review, and it is critical.

The final thing is that we really do need better consultation. The success of these reforms will be assessed by how well they are implemented. For very good reasons they were developed quickly and in a top-down manner, and consultation and engagement has unfortunately too often been swift and cursory. We want to improve the safety of early childhood in this state, and engaging with providers early on in implementation will improve, not detract, from it. Over the last three years I have been to 180 of our Goodstart services and I have spoken with thousands of educators. I know how dedicated they are to the safety of children, and it is incredibly important that we listen to them. [Zoom dropout]

**The CHAIR:** It seems like we have lost Dr Ros, so we will just defer to Kelly Jebb. Are there any other additions or final comments that you would like to add to the presentation before we get underway with questions?

**Kelly JEBB:** No, it was perfect timing. The last of Dr Ros’s opening statement was just that we share your objectives and we want to help. We all have a stake in rebuilding family trust, and we all want to lift quality and safety and give children a great start to learning. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much, Ms Jebb – just on time. I might get underway and ask some questions, and we will wait to see if Dr Ros will join us online. I know she is having connectivity issues. I just want to pick up on what she was talking about in relation to workforce stability. It occupies 70 per cent of your expenses. One of your centres was in the spotlight last year in Ballarat with a former employee that was allegedly engaged in sexual abuse of children. What quality and safety processes have you implemented since this incident to ensure that there is not a repeat of these sorts of incidents, given that Dr Ros appeared before the New South Wales parliamentary inquiry into early childhood and talked about how quality and safety are intertwined?

**Kelly JEBB:** Thank you. Yes, just to reiterate, workforce is absolutely the fundamental key to high-quality early childhood provision. One of the things that is really important is the relationship between children and educators and the stability of that relationship. A lot of the investment that we make is in wages – the above-award wages that we paid our workers even before the Australian government’s worker retention payment subsidy. We have always paid above award wages in an effort to maintain stability of our educators in centres so that there is the stability of that relationship. We have also seen significant improvements in the retention of early childhood educators and teachers since the introduction of the worker retention payment and a significant drop in vacancies across the sector. Both Goodstart and the sector have seen the benefits of that.

**The CHAIR:** Sorry to interrupt you, Ms Jebb. I just want to pick up – because what happened in the incident at one of your Ballarat centres was that the director of the centre, who was also a mandatory reporter, did not fulfil their obligation of mandatory reporting when there had come into their purview these allegations of abuse happening in the centre. So obviously there is something going on there where staff perhaps do not either know what they are supposed to be doing – their responsibilities as mandatory reporters – or the safety mechanisms within your organisation are uplifting staff to report these sorts of incidents as they arise.

**Kelly JEBB:** I can see Ros has joined us.

**The CHAIR:** Dr Ros, did you catch that question?

**Ros BAXTER:** I did catch the question. Apologies, I am having a series of technical disasters here this morning. I just had my phone overheat, so I apologise for that.

Thank you so much for the question about the incident that you have referred to. What we know in Goodstart is that we do have very clear policies and procedures, which all of our staff are well trained on. They begin from the moment that we recruit staff. We are very clear with them about their expectations that mandatory training occurs on a regular basis. We know it is good. It has won national awards. We have everything in our centres and in our operational support systems that wrap around ensuring people understand their duty to report. But you are absolutely right. In the incident that you are referring to we did have a situation where a centre director did not fulfil those reporting responsibilities as she should have. We know she undertook some reporting later in the piece, but she did not report according to our policies or as we would have expected. Now, we know from our reporting data, which we monitor very carefully through internal governance mechanisms and also through a governance committee of our board, that we have extremely high reporting rates in Goodstart. We have what I would call a very broad funnel of reporting. We encourage people to make reports even if they see some –

**The CHAIR:** Dr Baxter, is that incident reporting a special software program that Goodstart has that funnels through this information?

**Ros BAXTER:** We do have technical systems for incident reporting, that is correct. But we also have a number of fail-safes so that if people for one reason or another cannot report through the system or they are not sure how, we have a comprehensive safeguarding team who are available to take calls from people and we have a series of processes up through people’s line managers where they can also make reports.

**The CHAIR:** Is there a timeframe for that? Do they have to report within a certain number of hours when incidents are occurring in your centres?

**Ros BAXTER:** They are required to report in accordance with the statutory timeframes, so we would expect that reports are made that day, but it does vary a little bit from state to state about what those statutory timeframes are.

**The CHAIR:** Just in the Victorian context, what is your policy?

**Ros BAXTER:** Kelly, have you got that in front of you? I have got a number of different hours and days in my head for the different states.

**The CHAIR:** So it could potentially be up to days before an incident is reported – is that what you are saying?

**Kelly JEBB:** Chair, the national quality framework requires that complaints are notified within 24 hours. Up until recent changes there were seven-day requirements for incidents relating to sexual abuse matters. Goodstart always took the view that those should be reported within 24 hours, so we treated all of those notifications and incidents as complaints and required all reports to be made within 24 hours.

**The CHAIR:** Are they triaged?

**Kelly JEBB:** Yes.

**The CHAIR:** By who?

**Kelly JEBB:** We have a national safeguarding team that deals with allegations of a sexual nature or harm allegations.

**The CHAIR:** What kind of training do they have to be able to decipher what is a sexual abuse case that obviously needs to be reported onwards to police?

**Ros BAXTER:** Would you like me to take that one?

**Kelly JEBB:** Yes. Do you want to?

**Ros BAXTER:** It is a bit complicated with me online. Each of the specialists in our safeguarding team come with different specialisations. Many of them come from a child protection background. Some of them come from long experience in safeguarding within educational institutions. The head of our safeguarding unit has been working in that role for 10 years. She comes from a social work child protection background. We also have a number of people who are specialists in interviewing children, and they come from police or investigation backgrounds. We are constantly reviewing the skills of our safeguarding team. For example, Chair, we recently undertook a 10-year review looking back over the last 10 years at any allegations of a sexual nature that had taken place in Goodstart to refine our processes, and out of that we identified the need to do some more improvement of our processes in listening to children's voices. As a result of that we worked with the Office of the Children's Guardian in New South Wales, we looked at our processes, we developed new protocols for interviewing children and we also brought on some new staff with particular skills in child interviewing to make sure that we could capture that. There were a number –

**The CHAIR:** That is great. Thank you very much, Dr Baxter. I have actually run out of time, but I have just got one very quick question. Your casual workforce: what is the percentage of your workforce that is not permanent?

**Ros BAXTER:** We have a very small percentage. I do not have the number –

**The CHAIR:** Can I ask: would it be possible to take that on notice if you do not have it readily available?

**Ros BAXTER:** We do have a number. What we know is that we have a number of permanent part-time staff and we also have a smaller number of casual staff, which has been decreasing over the last number of years.

**The CHAIR:** But you do not have that number on you right now, what that percentage or figure is?

**Ros BAXTER:** Because we have been working so hard to decrease the casual workforce, I would not want to mislead you and give you the wrong number. But we can –

**The CHAIR:** That is absolutely fine. Thank you, Dr Baxter. My time has run out, so I am going to hand over to our Deputy Chair Mr Galea.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you, Chair. Good morning, both. Thank you for joining us. Firstly, in relation to the National Quality Standard, we have already received evidence of quite a large disparity between the outcomes of not-for-profit centres and for-profit centres. We have heard some evidence this morning about some of the potential reasons for that disparity. Is there anything that you would put forward as the main reason behind that difference?

**Ros BAXTER:** What I would say in relation to this is that we know that there are some high-quality for-profit providers, particularly those that operate in local communities – might be one or two service operations, perhaps run by a family operation. What I would say is that making choices that lead to better safety and quality for children is about what your motivation is. For Goodstart our mission is very clear. We exist to ensure that all of Australia's children have the best start in school and life, so each of the choices we make, including about where we place our revenue, goes to that end. It is very much about: what is your reason for being? What is your motivation? It is not to say that a for-profit provider could not be providing high-quality, safe services, but it does mean that you are constantly needing to make trade-offs and choices to ensure that children's safety is prioritised. For example, the thing that keeps children most safe in services every day is a sufficient number of well-paid, consistent, highly trained staff. In Goodstart we know what proportion of our revenue goes to ensuring that that is the situation, and it is a very high proportion of our revenue. It is possible to look at documents that are on the public record to see what some other organisations do in that regard and what proportion of their revenue goes towards paying their staff, undertaking professional development and in some cases making choices that we would make, like staffing particular rooms at higher than required ratios to ensure that children can be safe and that quality can be high. We would say this is the number one choice-making difference that we see between us and some other providers who may not have quality that is as high.

The second one is around the extra staffing you might allocate towards children with additional needs, who may need something extra. For us in Goodstart, for example, we received about \$13 million from the Commonwealth government last year for the inclusion support program, but we ourselves put in an extra \$12.3 million to supporting children with additional needs to have extra educators where they may need them, and that is before we even go into the extra professional development, the extra allied health supports that we provide for children with additional needs. Those are just two examples, but I would say it is a matter of choice and it is driven by the mission of the organisation.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you. You have also highlighted in your submission a significant variance in the staff turnover rate. Would that also be a factor in achieving the quality standards but also in assuring child safety?

**Ros BAXTER:** Absolutely. The ACCC review was very clear that not-for-profit providers are more likely to keep their staff and they are more likely to pay their staff higher rates, invest in professional development and make some of those choices that lead to consistency of staff. We strongly believe in Goodstart that consistent staff are absolutely key to ensuring not just safety but the quality of services. It is one of the reasons why we have advocated very strongly for a national early childhood commission, because we think there are a number of service planning and workforce issues that contribute to the unfortunately very high turnover of staff that we see in some of those, in particular, for-profit services.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you. Dr Baxter or Ms Jebb, do you have the breakdown of your centres in Victoria by which ones are meeting, exceeding or not meeting the NQS standards?

**Ros BAXTER:** I do not have the exceeding numbers with me – Ms Jebb may – but I know that we currently only have two centres in Victoria that are not meeting, and we are working very intensively with those services. In both cases – and it is a very good example of what we have just been talking about – those issues are related to the services being in a regional area and the difficulty of being able to retain staff in that service. But we are putting a lot of investment into addressing those issues.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you. Perhaps if I can get that data off you on notice for the breakdown of your Victorian centres – would that be okay?

**Ros BAXTER:** I will check if I have got it here. Kelly, have you got it there with you?

**Kelly JEBB:** I have national data but not Victoria-specific.

**Michael GALEA:** I am happy to say national data, and if you can provide state-specific on notice.

**Kelly JEBB:** Yes. Across our Goodstart and Big Fat Smile services, 25 per cent of our services are exceeding the National Quality Standard, 73 per cent are meeting and 1 per cent are working towards.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you very much. Your submission also advocates for changing the nature of the National Quality Standard to strengthen them and to basically, as far as I can work out, toughen the threshold to get to each of those levels of 'meeting' and 'exceeding'. Can you talk to me a little bit more about that and what you would like to see changed?

**Kelly JEBB:** I am not sure that that was the intention. We strongly support the National Quality Standard. What we do highlight is some recent research about the value of specific standards within that that highlight that to really shift child developmental outcomes. There are some of the elements that are more important. I think it is National Quality Standard 1, 3 and 5 from memory.

**Michael GALEA:** That is what it says.

**Kelly JEBB:** Yes. They are really critical to those developmental outcomes. As we know, one in five Australian children start school developmentally vulnerable, and that increases to two in five First Nations children, so I think just really placing an emphasis on the investment that happens in that space, particularly on the quality of the education and learning, the pedagogy and programming to achieve those developmental outcomes.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you. Also in relation to a few various factors but in particular three-year-old kinder – you have spoken about the investments in this state and through the SRF as well – what difference does having that full access to kinder at three years old make for the difference that you see then in four-year-old kinder and beyond?

**Ros BAXTER:** We have strongly advocated for better access to three-year-old kindy, and Victoria has been a really standout example of that. Kelly has already mentioned the fact that we know from our Australian early development census that we have somewhere between 25 and [Zoom dropout] per cent of children in this country who are starting school in their foundational year behind their peers and developmentally vulnerable on at least one domain, if not in many cases two domains. What we know is that when we have that second year of a structured kindergarten program it gives those children who might take a bit longer to catch up that longer lead time to work with the sorts of programs that are likely to help them get ready for school and meet those schooling challenges alongside their peers.

The sorts of programs that we would have and that all high-quality kindergartens would have are programs that work on each of those domains of the Australian early development census, so not just the cognitive and language domains. For example, in Goodstart we work on an 'all children communicate' basis, which is about really building some of those really fundamental communication literacy skills, but also on some of the other key skills that are really important for starting school, like self-regulation, which can be an underlooked but a very, very important part of children being able to get the best out of school and being able to really learn in the ways that we would hope they can. Two years is much more effective. We would also say for very vulnerable children that sometimes it takes a bit longer, especially if home is not a place where they might be getting access to high-quality experiences and high-quality conversations. That is why we think it is also really important to think about the programs for children from birth to three as well. We have many children from the ages of birth to three in our Goodstart centres, and we ensure they also have access to high-quality pedagogy, the sort of pedagogy that is going to help them build those early language and child development areas and that is also going to help with their ability to get along with others and self-regulate.

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

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

**Georgie CROZIER:** Thank you very much, Chair. Good morning, Dr Baxter and Ms Jebb. Thank you very much for being before the committee this morning and providing the evidence that you have to us. In your submission you speak about further strengthening the working with children check, including, and you mentioned this, introducing linking the check from the employee to the employer and introducing an online

portal to monitor the status of the linked employee's working with children check, similar to what Queensland has with their blue card. Can you explain a little bit more to the committee what that looks like?

**Kelly JEBB:** I hold a blue card in Queensland, and when I started employment at Goodstart they connected to my blue card. In Victoria the onus is on the employee to do that, and the field where you input your employee contact details is not a mandatory field. I just think that leaves a really significant loophole in the system, where if there is a change to the status of their working with children check here in Victoria their employer might not be notified in a really timely way.

**Georgie CROZIER:** Do you think Victoria is behind other states in these important checks?

**Kelly JEBB:** Victoria have made some really significant progress in their working with children check system over the last year, which has been really, really welcome. This is one of the things that we think is really critical to a stronger working with children check and that we think is still vital.

**Georgie CROZIER:** The government did do that after it was highlighted by the alleged incident that is partly the reason why we are having this inquiry. But back in 2022 the Ombudsman made a recommendation to the government around strengthening the working with children check through the work that they did. Are you aware of their recommendation?

**Kelly JEBB:** Yes.

**Georgie CROZIER:** When were you made aware of the recommendation?

**Ros BAXTER:** I think the issue, if I could just chip in –

**Georgie CROZIER:** I am just keen to understand what you were doing and whether this was a concern for you prior to the last 12 months, given your knowledge of what goes on in Queensland and given what we have seen happen in Victoria. I am keen to understand when you knew about that recommendation that the Ombudsman made in September 2022.

**Ros BAXTER:** Thank you for that. You are absolutely right; because we operate across the nation, we see the strengths and weaknesses in each of the state working with children check systems. I mean, I could not speak to who exactly in our organisation knew about that particular Ombudsman report, but we do have a social policy group that keeps very close track of recommendations that are made. In Goodstart we have advocated for some time for a national working with children check.

**Georgie CROZIER:** How long is this 'some time', Dr Baxter? I am just keen to get an understanding. Is it in the last six months, 12 months, three years?

**Ros BAXTER:** It was well beyond that. Certainly in the time that I have been here over the last three years we have been talking about and calling for a national working with children check. As you know, the national working with children check was actually recommended by the national Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse 10 years ago. I am aware of the recommendation that you have mentioned, but many of the things that Victoria does in its scheme are very high quality, and we would consider them to be positive things about its working with children check scheme, including the recent changes that have been made. There are some positive things about the Queensland scheme, but there have also been things in Queensland where we have advocated for changes.

The main reason why we have called for a national scheme is because it is insufficient to simply allow states to check each other's schemes, to check whether someone has a valid working with children check or whether they have been banned. What we really need to do is start from scratch and look at each of those thresholds for assessment, reassessment and temporary suspension, make sure we get them right everywhere nationally and make sure we are able to do that work nationally which Victoria has done so well about really [Zoom dropout] of where there are patterns of concern.

**Georgie CROZIER:** Could I ask – thank you, and sorry to cut across. It is a bit hard not seeing you and with the time. Could I ask: who did you advocate to? You said you have been advocating to government. When did you start that process, and who did you advocate to?

**Ros BAXTER:** We certainly made representations through the national child safety regulatory impact statement processes, but before that we were frequently in national forums and state forums where we were called upon to give our opinion about these matters, including through various reference groups that we sit on. I could not give you a complete and comprehensive history here of where we have done that, when and to who, but it has certainly been a position of Goodstart for some time in relation to a national working with children check. We did brief the rapid review on that belief, plus we have also written to the Prime Minister about that view alongside other quality not-for-profits. We will continue to advocate for a national working with children check scheme, because no matter how good an individual state scheme is, it is insufficient in a federated system like Australia.

**Georgie CROZIER:** Thank you, Dr Baxter. I appreciate you have been in various forums. You mentioned the inquiry into child abuse, the royal commission, which also advocated for this. I am just keen to understand what you have done specifically for Victoria, or did you only advocate at that national level, or did you speak with government ministers or department representatives around your concerns that you have been expressing nationally? And if so, when did you do that?

**Ros BAXTER:** I am very happy to take that on notice. I certainly could not do that comprehensively here for you. I can tell you every time that we have made a submission in the time that I have been here over the last three years, whether that is to a state or a Commonwealth process, we have mentioned our concerns with the working with children check system. That has included the Commonwealth regulatory impact statement process around child safety, but it has also included those other federal bodies that we sit on.

**Georgie CROZIER:** Thank you for taking that on notice. If you could, did you during those three years – as you said, you were aware of what the Ombudsman raised around their recommendation. Whether that was also raised in those discussions with government – I would be keen to understand that. Thank you.

**Ros BAXTER:** We can check that. I can also let you know that, for Goodstart, if we do have an incident or something we believe we can learn from, we do raise those matters with governments as well, and you are all aware that we did that in certain cases that happened in Victoria.

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

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

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Thank you. Thank you both for appearing today and for your submissions. In your submission and also in the one made to the New South Wales inquiry you mention that the national quality framework is a really important part of our system but the issues with it are not so much what is contained in the framework itself, rather the implementation of it. Can you expand on that? What do you mean by ‘issues with implementation’?

**Ros BAXTER:** I might start and then I will hand to Kelly, who can provide some Victoria-specific examples. We would say that as a whole, until reasonably recent times, there had been a fairly patchy approach to implementation of the NQS across the states and the Commonwealth. While the states were doing certainly all they could and while state regulators were doing all they could within their powers and their funding to ensure that services adhere to the National Quality Standard, they were not always funded at a level that allowed them to visit at the rhythm that would be appropriate to be ensuring that safety and quality were being adhered to. They did not always have access to sufficient numbers of regulatory officers. As I have said, in Victoria we have seen some of the best practice in regulation against the NQS in this country. You see that in the lower numbers of services that are working towards, in the higher numbers and more frequency of visits and also in the lower numbers of staffing waivers because of some of those investments. But in general our concern about how regulators have been funded and how they have been supported to do that very important work is what is [Zoom dropout] concern around implementation. I will throw to Kelly, who may have some more specific examples, but that has really been our primary concern.

**Kelly JEBB:** Yes, I think we have seen really welcome investment in regulatory authorities across the country, because the level of investment in regulation has not always matched the growth in the sector. But as Dr Ros noted in her opening statement, Victoria has a very good track record of up-to-date quality assessments, and there is the investment that we have seen in the workforce through the school readiness fund, which is an

exemplar nationally in investment in supporting inclusion. We have seen the lowest rates of waivers and also the highest number of services meeting or exceeding the National Quality Standard.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Thank you. I guess if we are accepting that the standard is okay and it is actually being implemented relatively well here in Victoria compared to other jurisdictions, how does that then reconcile with centres where they might be meeting or exceeding standards but we are still having serious failures of safeguards and compliance with those standards?

**Ros BAXTER:** I think what we would say there is that it really takes a lot of investment to provide the highest quality of child learning and also of safety incentives. It is very important that we are completely compliant with the National Quality Standard, but it is also really important that you build an ongoing and strong safeguarding culture. In Goodstart this safeguarding culture – I mean, I cannot describe to you the breadth and the level of investment that this takes right from [Zoom dropout]

**The CHAIR:** Sorry, Dr Baxter, you are actually cutting out, so I might defer to Ms Jebb, if she would like to add anything to that. Ms Jebb, is there anything you would like to add to that?

**Kelly JEBB:** I think just to add that the recent changes to the national law introduced that children's safety must be the paramount consideration. I think across the early learning sector the vast majority of educators have always known that to be true. What we really want to acknowledge is that the system must acknowledge the paramount consideration of the children. The Queensland Family and Child Commission's report *In Plain Sight* highlights where, even when educators were concerned and made the appropriate notifications, the system was not always ready to respond – where agencies said 'That's not in my remit' or 'That doesn't meet our threshold'. But what we see is a pattern of behaviours, and we need to make sure that the system acknowledges, addresses, reports and responds to those patterns, not just individual notifications.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Within your organisation, how do you manage risk where, say, an educator works across multiple sites or multiple centres? How do you address those sorts of patterns of behaviour or where there are repeated complaints against an employee?

**Kelly JEBB:** The treatment of complaints against employees does not change, regardless of where they work, but certainly we would adopt certain risk mitigation strategies if people were working across multiple centres. I know we have taken it on notice, but I just want to reiterate that our casual and contract workforce is really, really low – significantly low compared to the sector – and has been the result of a very deliberate retention of permanent staff over a long time, largely because we believe that that is really important for children's wellbeing, that stable and consistent relationship with their educator. Does that answer your question?

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** I think so. Is there a centralised way of safeguarding against and picking up issues with employees who work across multiple centres, perhaps not just even within your own network but within multiple centres across Victoria?

**Kelly JEBB:** We have done really great work with our agency recruitment and contract providers to make sure that they too are adopting child-safe organisation practices. Something that the national child safety review recommended that has not yet been implemented is the ability for agencies like that to access the prohibited persons register. I think it is really critical, if they are recommending people are able to be employed temporarily in centres, that they know whether that person has permission to work in the early childhood sector.

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

**Ros BAXTER:** Could I just add something in there?

**The CHAIR:** Just quickly, Dr Baxter, because Dr Mansfield's time has expired.

**Ros BAXTER:** I was just going to say that all of our in-house systems also support careful tracking of people, whether they do shifts in another centre or not. I have already mentioned – and Kelly has as well – that we have worked very hard to get our agency usage down to less than 1 per cent of our staffing. But even where we might have people sharing shifts across centres, all of our systems support being able to see patterns, identify patterns and take action should we need to.

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

**Melina BATH:** Thank you very much for being here today. I want to talk about educator training. I think your submission talks about bachelor completion rates, and the most recent data is 40 per cent of completion rates in 2022, diploma completion rates of 39 per cent in 2023 and certificate III completion rates of 32 per cent. These are in rounded figures. You do not have a Victorian basis. You can take that on notice. It does not seem to be readily available for me to access. Do you have any of that data?

**Kelly JEBB:** I do not have it to hand. I will endeavour to find it. I am not sure if it is available at the jurisdiction level, but we will look.

**Melina BATH:** Thank you. That is great. Completion rates are below 50 per cent nationally, we will say, for all of those three different qualifications. Your submission talks about the inconsistency of educator training. Across private RTOs, TAFEs and university what should the Victorian government do to ensure that these training providers deliver a better quality of training that is fit for purpose for the early childhood sector?

**Ros BAXTER:** The number one thing that we think is important in this regard is the development of some national stewardship around this issue, so a minimum qualification framework that really identifies: what is it that people need to be trained for? Are we confident that people who are coming through these various qualification pathways are leaving those periods of study with the skills they need and in particular the understanding of child development, the understanding of complex inclusion needs and the ability to hit the ground running in a centre? There has not been that coordinated national and state approach to really looking at: what should that minimum qualification look like? How should that feed into the opportunities that are available at the state and local level? While we have seen some workforce strategies, they have tended to be collections of micro-actions rather than a comprehensive look at: how do we decide what is the coverage, what is the quality and how are we going to make sure we uplift those standards across all of our centres? Kelly, I do not know if you want to add, in the Victorian context in particular, the reference to our recommendations here.

**Kelly JEBB:** Just that we think it is really important that new registered training organisations are assessed before the one-year mark. I think when you have got people investing in what should be really high-quality training, a year is probably too late, and that should be brought forward.

**Melina BATH:** Thank you. I am going to put a regional hat on, if you can speak regionally across Australia but more specifically in Victoria. Again, we have childcare deserts in regional Victoria. Can you suggest ways that the Victorian government – we are making recommendations to government – could provide and strengthen those training providers and gaps in any of the support for that training?

**Ros BAXTER:** Can I just check: is your question particularly about the availability of staff members and training of staff members in deserts?

**Melina BATH:** Yes. And in order to meet market demand in the regions, you need to train people into the sector. Do you see any gaps or is there any differentiation in training providers in the regions, whether that be unis or TAFEs or RTOs, and in the city? Or have I gone too fine-grain?

**Ros BAXTER:** We certainly do. I have already mentioned a couple of those centres that we have in regional Victoria that unfortunately we have seen in that ‘working towards’ category and the strong link between that and the inability to secure appropriately qualified staff in those areas. So there definitely are some gaps. We know in the current context there are a lot of approaches to training that enable people in regional areas to access nodes that might be situated in a city, but what we find is that the ability to attract those people and retain them to the regional areas is the really, really difficult part. We in Goodstart do our own internal training to try to compensate for that. We also develop our own employee attraction mechanisms for regional areas to try to encourage people to not only work but also train in regional areas. But it is a very, very difficult area for us. One of the things that we have invested in is in particular the leadership of centres in regional areas. The centre director, the assistant director and the educational leader are really critical both to ensuring those staff in centres complete their qualifications but also that we retain staff. We have found that we have had to really fill some of that gap with our own internal leadership training and support, so we run programs that specifically target that educational leader, assistant director and centre director layer.

**Melina BATH:** Yes. Anecdotally too from my region, often private providers feel that they have to upskill staff that come out of an institution, whether it is an RTO or a TAFE, in order to meet their standard internally – that is my experience. Can you talk about the pressures in terms of professional development time, so busy centres actually being able to provide professional development? How can that be assisted through any measures of state government, or is that just a professional internal decision?

**Ros BAXTER:** No, it absolutely can be supported by decisions that are made by state and federal governments. Goodstart has advocated at both the state and federal levels to ensure that we can have some support for that professional development time for educators, the same way that teachers and teacher aides in schools would have access to off-site or out-of-class-hours professional development. In the federal sphere we have advocated for consideration of use of the childcare subsidy for professional development days, and the federal government is doing some experimentation in that regard now. At the state level we have seen some states invest in professional development. In Victoria we have seen that happen particularly strongly around the kindergarten years. But this is also a choice that is made by providers. For Goodstart, we do allocate a certain number of off-floor professional development hours for educators and a different amount for teachers to ensure they can have that professional learning. What we find tricky is when we have new requirements come in over the top of our existing programs – for example, the national child safety training, which we welcome. We are very, very keen to work with the states and the Commonwealth on what that looks like. We are yet to comprehensively see that training so we can understand what that might mean in terms of hours off floor and extra supports for our people. We want to make sure that this works, but it is one of those examples that I talked about earlier where some better, more structured consultation with the sector about how to roll this thing out will make sure we can do it in ways that actually benefit our staff and are not just an extra requirement that they are trying to shuffle around everything else they are doing.

**Melina BATH:** Thank you. Thanks very much.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Ms Ermacora, who is joining us online.

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** Thank you very much. I really appreciate hearing from people who have got such a good overview of the entire system, which is terrific, and are able to identify the strengths and a lot of detail about the strengths in all aspects of the system, in particular the Victorian system, but also identify where more strengths could happen. I am interested in what you said about how regulatory systems should be better aligned or linked and how there should be clearer lines. I think Dr Ros mentioned that. I just wonder if you could describe how that would work better. Yes, flesh that out a little bit, please.

**Ros BAXTER:** Why don't I kick off here. Thank you for that question. Goodstart and many others now have repeatedly called for a national early childhood education and care commission, but really we are not particularly attached to what it is called. What we are talking about really is better stewardship of the system as a whole between the state powers and regulatory areas and the Commonwealth areas and working closely with providers. In particular, we find that the roles and functions that the states and Commonwealth have in supply, both ensuring there is sufficient supply but also regulating oversupply, are areas that have not been well managed to date. We know that there were about 500 new centres opened in Australia last year. None of those were in deserts, and almost all of those were opened by for-profit providers. We know from our experience in Goodstart that those centres often open in areas where there are already very high-quality providers and already an overservicing of that market, and what happens as a result is that you actually have safety and quality implications for children. You have children who are then moving between centres because there might be short-term inducements from a centre that is opening to take either staff or children.

We strongly believe there needs to be some better service planning between Commonwealth and state regulators about where services are opening, what their quality is and what their commitment to quality is, and that is something that can really only happen in a joined-up conversation between all of those layers of government and providers. We also think regulators need to work better together on quality and safety. What can we learn from each other? What can we learn from the data that different states and territories are producing? What can we understand about what works and what does not? We think that is a really important role for a national commission as well.

I have made some comments about workforce and that being an area where we think different layers of government and different regulators can work more effectively together as well. So we think having these

national conversations with some clear objectives and a clear remit for what the states are trying to achieve, what the Commonwealth is trying to achieve and, in some cases, what local government is trying to achieve are really key to making sure we have a system that is more effectively knitted together.

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** Thanks for that. With the oversupply–undersupply issue, should there be a kind of incentive, perhaps a Commonwealth incentive program that supports a fairer distribution?

**Ros BAXTER:** We have certainly seen that in terms of the Building Early Education Fund, the BEEF. We have also seen some of that happen through philanthropists. But of course even a billion dollars is just a start on managing the need. What we have said a national commission should do in terms of undersupply is it should actually start by prioritising areas of need based on data, having a really clear sense of the prioritisation of where we need to go, where is most urgent and which areas are most underserved for quality and working in a really systematic way through the allocation of funding as it becomes available. As I said, oversupply is even more critical, and the role there would be around some joined-up service planning and having clear parameters about when a service can open. You cannot go into any area and just open up a new school. There is a really clear service-planning process that happens there, and we would like to see something similar happen so we do not see providers who have already got compromised quality and safety in their existing services opening new services.

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** Thank you. Excellent. I just want to move to the Commonwealth childcare subsidy. Has appropriate oversight of their expenditure been happening, especially in the private sector?

**Ros BAXTER:** Do you mean is there fraudulent behaviour in relation to childcare subsidies? Is that the question?

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** Yes, possibly, but it is more: does the Commonwealth have a good level of oversight around their subsidy into the private sector?

**Ros BAXTER:** Yes. I can tell you before I was at Goodstart I worked in the Commonwealth in that particular area, and I know there is very stringent oversight, very, very careful oversight, of childcare subsidy expenditures. Of course the Commonwealth over the recent couple of years has been much more proactive in terms of removing access to childcare subsidy for those providers who have demonstrated that they perhaps do not have the commitment to quality and safety that we would all expect. We have seen a number of providers have their access to the childcare subsidy removed, and I understand there is a suite of further providers who fall into that situation.

I think the more interesting question is: what does the childcare subsidy provide for, and how do we ensure that those who are receiving the childcare subsidy really do the things that we are expecting that they are doing? Now, there is a very interesting policy exercise happening at the moment in the Commonwealth that Goodstart is contributing to called the service delivery price project. I often say it is the worst name for the most exciting piece of public policy I am involved in at the moment.

**Jacinta Ermacora** interjected.

**Ros BAXTER:** Sorry? Maybe leaving aside BEEF, it is the worst name. But it really is looking at: what is it that we fund for, what should we be funding for and is the childcare subsidy sufficient to make sure that providers can operate at the level of quality, safety and inclusion that we would expect? We know, for example, that it is very expensive to include children who have additional needs, and anecdotally we know that some providers are not as good at taking those children into their services and supporting them as others are. We at Goodstart have about three times, for example, the number of children with a particular kind of additional need than is the industry average. These are the sorts of questions we need to be asking, but certainly the Commonwealth is asking those questions through that process. It is a two-year process. I think they have funded \$10 million to get to the bottom of that, so it is very comprehensive, and I for one am really excited to see the outcomes of that process.

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** I would just like to take a moment now to thank you both, Dr Baxter for persisting online as well as Ms Jebb, for your appearance before the committee today – thank you for your evidence – noting that

you will receive a copy of the transcript for review in about a week before it is published on the website and also noting that there are a few requests to be taken on notice, please.

We will now take a break for lunch, and we will return at 1 o'clock.

**Witnesses withdrew.**