

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

WITNESS (*via videoconference*)

Samantha Page, Chief Executive Officer, Early Childhood Australia.

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

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

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

Samantha PAGE: Thank you. My name is Samantha Page, and I am appearing on behalf of Early Childhood Australia.

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

Michael GALEA: Good afternoon. Michael Galea, Deputy Chair, Member for South-Eastern Metropolitan.

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

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

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

The CHAIR: We also have Ms Ermacora, who will be joining us very shortly. I would now like to invite you, Ms Page, to make an opening statement, if you can keep it to a maximum of 8 to 10 minutes to ensure that we have plenty of time for discussion. Thank you.

Samantha PAGE: I will attempt to do that. Thank you very much, Chair. Early Childhood Australia, just for those who do not know who we are, are a peak body representing the best interests of children in the early years, from birth to the age of eight. We have been around a really long time. We started out as the preschool association and have gone on to represent a very diverse range of services and professionals who work with young children. We have a mix of members, both individual and organisational, and we have a very active Victorian branch committee that includes leaders from the sector. Our ECA Vic committee are in regular contact with our members through member forums and communications by email and social media. So we have quite a substantial membership and a very active membership in Victoria. We are a not-for-profit – I should specify that – with a national board of directors, and I am the CEO.

Now that you know who we are, just to reiterate that we have long advocated for the provision of a universal early childhood education and care system across Australia that should be affordable, accessible, high quality and uncompromising in keeping children safe, foregrounding the best interests and rights and wellbeing of children. The devastating reports of child harm, maltreatment and child sexual abuse in some early childhood services have been shocking and deeply concerning. We remain steadfast in our commitment to working with the Australian and Victorian governments and counterparts in other jurisdictions as well as working with the early childhood profession and the sector towards strengthening child safety and safeguarding across all service types and all parts of Australia. I have mentioned that we have a dynamic committee in Victoria. We also have a team of staff who are based in Victoria, and we deliver a number of national programs in Victoria and in other states, including Be You, which is the mental health in education initiative. We currently work with over 7000 early childhood services that participate in that initiative.

I am very pleased to provide our submission to this inquiry, which was informed by a short survey of our Victorian members, as well as drawing on our expertise and thinking in the area of child safety and safeguarding and early childhood education and care quality over many years. We know that the quality of early childhood education and care is very important in the lives of young children and to their families. We also acknowledge that that has not been the experience for every child and every family. So we now need to look at the adequacy of the current quality and safety standards across service types, the quality of providers and the training and qualification requirements on the professionals that work across the sector. We do recognise that the overwhelming majority of early childhood educators, teachers and service leaders do meet or exceed their responsibilities and obligations under the national law and regulations and in fact turn up every day to provide the very best quality service they can to children. However, we need to make sure that there are no gaps or risks in the system and that every child is safe and thriving. Where there is fragmentation of service delivery and provision, we see inconsistencies in policy funding and different approaches, and this has been open to exploitation by bad actors, so addressing these inconsistencies is a priority for us.

We have heard from many early childhood professionals across the sector that the compliance workload is heavy, particularly at the moment, with a lot of initiatives happening all at once, including the mandatory child safety training and the educator register. The pace of change is not borne evenly across the sector, and we recognise that services, teams and individual educators need support to manage these changes. We also recognise that there needs to be more emphasis on clearly demonstrating and articulating what good ethical practice looks like, particularly in relation to the supervision of children and staff-to-child ratios and rostering practices.

The quality and oversight of educator training, professional development and qualifications, including a review of the working with children checks and the adequacy of the work done by registered training organisations, is a very live conversation across the sector. We know there have been variations in the quality of the qualifications programs that have been on offer. That has been tightening and improving, but there is still more to be done. We do think that a comprehensive research study into how the delivery of early childhood qualifications is happening and what the expectations are on students and trainees and new graduates could be codified, could be further strengthened.

We also think that there could be a strengthening of how programs are accredited and who does that accreditation, particularly looking at the rigour that AITSL apply to the qualifications for the school sector. We do understand that AITSL does review teacher qualifications for people doing early childhood qualifications but only if they are combined with the older age group, the school cohort. We do think that that oversight could be applied to the birth-to-five degrees. We think that there needs to be continuous and rigorous monitoring of registered training organisations as well as more articulation on what trainees, particularly trainees engaged in the certificate III, can and cannot be expected to do as part of their day-to-day work and at what point they should be counted in staff-to-child ratios.

We support moves to strengthen the working with children checks around the country and to ensure that anyone who is banned in one jurisdiction is banned in all jurisdictions. But we would also like to see more live monitoring on that system and more ready engagement from employers to be able to check that people's working with children check is up to date and has not been removed.

Taking a broader view, the ecosystem in Victoria is made up of providers and services across public, not-for-profit and for-profit providers. While we do recognise there are some very good for-profit providers, we also recognise that the not-for-profits have a better track record on quality. We should be interrogating that and looking at how we recalibrate the expectations on all providers. Was that my time beep?

The CHAIR: That is okay. Have you got any concluding remarks before we go into question time?

Samantha PAGE: Absolutely. I will just mention a couple of things. Pay and conditions and professional recognition continue to detract from the recruitment of quality early childhood professionals. We do think more work could be done on how we retain educators and grow leaders, including investment in leadership and management. We support the recent review of staff-to-child ratios and better articulation of how ratios are meant to work. They are not meant to be a standard staffing requirement; they are only a minimum. Most good-quality services would be staffing above that, but also understanding how ratios work, and the limited application of under-the-roof ratios needs to be discussed. We are also happy to talk of course about regulatory

oversight, and we support the new independent regulator in Victoria. We have provided a comprehensive submission to the inquiry, and I am very happy to speak to that or take any questions.

The CHAIR: That is wonderful. Thank you very much, Ms Page, for that comprehensive opening statement. I would like to begin by just picking up your last point there on the new independent regulator, VECRA. Have you had any interaction with them since their formation at the start of the year?

Samantha PAGE: It is pretty new, early days, so we are very supportive of VECRA. But no, I have not met with them as yet.

The CHAIR: Okay. You raised some really good points in your opening statement that I would like to speak to around staff-to-child ratios. You spoke about certificate III educators – that the expectation should not be on them to do more than what they have been essentially trained on – and then we have also got the under-the-roof line legislation and policy. What has been happening is some services are exploiting the under-the-roof line when it comes to staff-to-child ratios, where they are counting reception staff and perhaps the chefs in the centres as staff to try and meet those requirements. What are your suggestions? You mentioned it should not be just a baseline, staff-to-child ratios, so what should be the safe staff-to-child ratios for centres that really are prioritising safety of children in early child care?

Samantha PAGE: I will be really interested to see the work that has been done recently by ACECQA when that is released. I understand education ministers indicated on Friday they would be releasing that piece of work. I think when the national quality framework came in back in 2012 there was a national dialogue on staff-to-child ratios and what they mean and what they look like and how they should be implemented and also that they were a minimum requirement for safety, not that everybody would staff at a minimum level all the time. That was not the expectation at all. I think we have drifted from that. I think we do now have evidence of providers that have exploited the under-the-roof ratio flexibility and staffed at minimum staffing levels and included unqualified educators in staff-to-child ratios to an extent that we never would have expected or supported when the national quality framework was introduced.

So I think it is really important now that we have that conversation again about what staff-to-child ratios look like and how they should be applied. Flexibilities such as under-the-roof really are meant to go hand in hand with the requirement that you are always staffing for child safety and high-quality pedagogy. You cannot do safe and high-quality pedagogy if you are staffing at the very minimum levels in the building, as you have discussed, on an ongoing basis. But the flexibility does allow particularly small services in rural and regional Australia to not have to necessarily bring in another person for break covers. So it is difficult to just remove it, but I do think we need to have a conversation and be more explicit about what the expectations are in terms of providers and how they interpret that. I did mention, I think, also that there was a time when the proportion of trainees or people who were employed as educators but had not yet completed their certificate III, so undertaking their certificate III as they work on the job – they may not have done any of their training yet. They may have just enrolled in their certificate III. They should not be counted in ratios.

The CHAIR: How common is that, Ms Page, in the sector where you have got educators who perhaps are not fully qualified actually providing care to children in the sector?

Samantha PAGE: It is much more common now than it used to be. Certainly pre COVID to post COVID there are a much higher number. I do not have the exact data. I can see what I can find in terms of the number of educators that are employed that are still studying their initial qualification, because we need to separate those that are studying for a higher level qualification, but those studying the initial qualification. I do think there is a lack of codified expectations. When we look at apprentices in the construction industry, it is very clear what you can and cannot ask a first-year apprentice to do. We do not have that same articulation on what you can and cannot ask a trainee in their first year of a certificate III to do or what knowledge you might expect them to have. I think there is a point along that studying continuum where we could say that educator can now be counted in staff-to-child ratios, but it should not be on day one.

The CHAIR: Yes, absolutely. I just want to ask your perspective on the new independent regulator, VECRA. What new powers do you think need to be given to this body to truly make it independent?

Samantha PAGE: I think the value of having an independent regulator is that they are better placed themselves to make decisions about their priorities and their resourcing and what they need to do. I do not feel

like I can speak for them, but I am glad that they have that independent authority in order to determine for themselves what is going to make the biggest difference in terms of quality and regulatory oversight in Victoria. I think one of the challenges for regulators generally – and I am assuming that it is the same in Victoria as it is in other states – is the current churn in ownership, particularly in long day care, where we are seeing a lot of turnover of centres and it is difficult for regulators to stay –

The CHAIR: You are referring to the casualisation and precarity of the sector, that there is a high staff turnover?

Samantha PAGE: There is that, and that is a problem, but the other one is the ownership of services, so services being bought and sold. Long day care services are often bought and sold. My understanding from the industry is that we have a record number of services for sale and that we have seen a big churn in the turnover of services, which is difficult for regulators.

The CHAIR: Sorry, Ms Page, I do not mean to cut into your answer there, but because I am running out of time, I really want to get this next question in. You spoke in your opening statement about compliance overload. Obviously we have got for-profit, publicly owned, non-profit – all various structures and models in the early childcare space. What are the unintended risks that could become apparent with this compliance overload that you are speaking to?

Samantha PAGE: It is taking an enormous amount of energy and focus in providers to meet their obligations under the registration of educators, which is happening at the same time as the mandatory child safety rollout as well as there being changes to wage rates and the need to reclassify educators, so there is a very substantial administrative burden on services at the moment. You can see the questions coming through from small providers in particular, trying to navigate what their obligations are and how best to meet those. That is having an impact then on the degree to which services are investing in professional learning more broadly and investing in staff supervision and support, reflective practice, quality improvement and family engagement – when there is a particularly substantive administrative burden at the moment. I am not saying any of those initiatives are not important – they are, but they all seem to be colliding at the moment on services.

The CHAIR: I understand. Thank you very much. Mr Galea.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon, Ms Page. Thank you for joining us today. As I understand, your organisation runs the children's safety and safeguarding in early childhood services professional support program, and I am sure you are aware that the rapid review has called this out as an effective tool which should be expanded with support from the Department of Education. Could you please talk to me about what this program does and what it achieves?

Samantha PAGE: Yes. We have a taskforce of child safety and safeguarding experts that we brought together in the wake of reports last year, and they have been producing fact sheets and online content, webinar content and short courses to assist educators to really understand the new risks that are posed by child sexual abuse in particular. Perpetrators are looking for opportunities to harm children in early childhood settings. That has been a particular focus. How do we eliminate that risk? What are the foundations of good practice that are most effective in terms of preventing any opportunity for a child to be harmed? That has been the focus of that taskforce. That work has not been funded previously, but we have been in conversation more recently with the Victorian government and with some philanthropic partners about resourcing that work, and that will see more development in terms of live webinars and fact sheets. It will also see some face-to-face workshops and networks – communities of practice, if you will – happening across Victoria.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. I note you said you have engaged with the government already on this and on expanding this. The government's response to the rapid review says the timeframes will be subject to the rollout of the national mandatory training scheme. Whereabouts are you at at the moment with the rollout of this program?

Samantha PAGE: Sorry, I am not directly involved in the contract negotiations, but I think we are very close to a contract being signed, and the mandatory child safety training – my understanding is – will be available from next Friday.

Michael GALEA: Wonderful. Thank you for that. The review also called for a Commonwealth-led rethink of the broader system, including reconsideration of how the current funding model operates as well as the reliance on the private market to sustain the ECEC sector. How do you respond to this recommendation? Do you support it?

Samantha PAGE: We do see the need to move from – there has been a very hands-off, free-market approach to the delivery of early childhood services in the past, so the sector has been very much driven by private equity decisions about where services will be built and operated. That might have made sense when the federal government’s contribution to the cost of the delivery of those services was a small part of the overall financing system, but now the proportion funded by the federal government through the childcare subsidy is a much higher proportion of the cost of delivery, and we think now it makes sense to move to more of a social market in which government is much more involved in the stewardship of the system in terms of deciding where services are needed and supporting services to go where they are most needed, rather than that be reliant on a market-driven decision about whether a service is likely to be profitable in that community and also for the government to renegotiate what it expects of providers in terms of quality and child safeguarding.

You will see in our submission that we proposed 10 commitments that could be required of providers to demonstrate that that paramount consideration to the best interests of children is operationalised in the way services are delivered. Some of those are really no-brainers, like there should be early childhood expertise on the governing body. How do you make decisions that foreground children’s interests if you do not have that expertise in the boardroom? Others are a bit more controversial: capping surplus or profit and outrageous rent payments, for example. I know that would be difficult to implement, but I do think it is worth exploring if we move from what has been a free market approach to more of a social market approach, where the government is clearer on its expectations. It does not eliminate the role for private providers, but it does mean that we renegotiate with private providers a more modest surplus opportunity for a less risky sector, so less risky involvement in the system. At the moment we get a lot of providers complaining about unbridled growth in some areas that are already overserved. Meanwhile there are other communities that do not have a service because they are not considered financially viable. The system stewardship would even that out. It would provide greater stability for providers but reduced profit-making opportunities.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. The equity considerations in terms of access to child care would be very clear from that. But from your approach too, would you be of the view that if that were to be adopted – and indeed, by the sound of it, placing the needs of the child before profit, which is supposed to be the case – that would lead to better outcomes in terms of child safety?

Samantha PAGE: Yes, I think it would. I think it means that we can be much more confident that the system is focused on outcomes for children and families and is operating in a way that supports that at every level of decision-making, from governance and ownership right through to the education team that is working with the child on a day-to-day basis. I think that is what we should be expecting of a system going forward. It is much more of a publicly financed system, so we can expect it to deliver outcomes that are good for our society and our economy over the long term.

Michael GALEA: Thank you very much. My time is about up, so I will leave it there. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Ms Crozier.

Georgie CROZIER: Thank you very much, Chair. Thank you, Ms Page, for being before us this afternoon. You are the peak body. When did you first have concerns around the working with children check?

Samantha PAGE: To be honest, I have been involved in conversations about the working with children check for over 25 years in former roles in family relationship services, family services and child protection. There have been consistent calls from advocates for a national live system of working with children checks for a very long time.

Georgie CROZIER: From your position, though, Early Childhood Australia – when did they start advocating?

Samantha PAGE: I think we have called for a national system of working with children checks for at least 10 years. Certainly those calls have been more strident in the last three years.

Georgie CROZIER: Are you aware of the Victorian Ombudsman's report and their investigation into a former youth worker's unauthorised access to private information about children in September 2022 and the recommendation that the government look at the working with children check and review the *Worker Screening Act*?

Samantha PAGE: Yes, and I believe similar recommendations have been made in a number of reviews.

Georgie CROZIER: And the government did not take any action on that recommendation?

Samantha PAGE: My understanding is that there have been conversations between Attorneys-General at state level and federal level for some time.

Georgie CROZIER: Since when?

Samantha PAGE: I am unclear on the complexity of why it has not been able to be progressed quicker than it has.

Georgie CROZIER: I am interested in that comment you have just made. You are saying that Attorneys-General have been having conversations for some years around the working with children check?

Samantha PAGE: I believe so. I am not privy to those conversations, so I cannot be 100 per cent sure, but my understanding is that it has been considered because it has been a recommendation in a number of reviews.

Georgie CROZIER: Yes. It was not acted on here in Victoria after that strong recommendation. But thank you for that clarification that the discussions were happening and the former Attorney-General, now Treasurer, was aware and did not act on this. Can I go back to your point around having the model being a social market approach? Have you done any modelling on what that would look like for Victoria if the private market was taken out of the system?

Samantha PAGE: It would not necessitate the private market being taken out of the system. It is really a renegotiation with all providers around shared expectations, and there are some very good, high-quality private providers in Victoria. I am not at all suggesting that they would not have a place in that social market. A social market can be a hybrid mix of private, public and not-for-profit providers, and that is what we would expect it would be in Australia.

Georgie CROZIER: Isn't there the issue here around the governance and the issues and the weaknesses in the system and what can be provided across whether it is public, not-for-profit or private, because no sector is immune from some of the issues that we have been speaking about this morning and raising or that have been raised in the public domain.

Samantha PAGE: That is true. Stronger system stewardship is needed to give effect to that. If you have a free-market approach where providers can come and go very quickly, turnover very quickly – which goes back to my point about the churn, particularly in long day care services at the moment – and if providers are coming in with a view to turn a service around and make a quick profit, that makes it difficult for regulators. It makes it difficult for funding bodies to be sure about the quality of the services being provided.

Georgie CROZIER: In Victoria, how many services has that been done with in the last two years or three years? Have you got figures?

Samantha PAGE: How many have been bought and sold?

Georgie CROZIER: Yes, what is the turnover in Victoria? And is it any higher than any other state?

Samantha PAGE: I do not have the data in front of me. I would have to take that on notice and see if I can find it. I am not sure that it is published anywhere, to be honest, but we could try and find out through service approval trends.

Georgie CROZIER: I mean, you have made the statement, though, that it is happening, so I am just keen to understand the veracity of those claims and to understand that compared to other states and what that high turnover is.

Samantha PAGE: I cannot speak to the level of turnover in Victoria versus other states. I can take on notice the question about how many services have been bought and sold in the last two years.

Georgie CROZIER: I am sure you have got other data from other states, though, given you are the peak body. You would have to have some comparison, because what you are claiming to us is that there is a high turnover of these providers and therefore that is not a good governance model, and it seems to be a problem here in Victoria. What I am interested in is how many times this is occurring and whether it is occurring here in Victoria more frequently than elsewhere, and that could be for a whole lot of reasons – taxation, payroll tax – a whole range of reasons that businesses are not thriving in Victoria. I do not need to go down that line. What I am interested in is the veracity of your comments today, so if you can provide that on notice, that would be great.

The other issue is around the variation in qualifications in programs on offer. Is that a problem across the country or is it a particular concern for Victoria versus other states? I think you said it happened pre and post COVID that people were coming into the system not fully qualified. I am just wondering if you could expand on those comments that you made – I think to Mr Galea. I might be wrong on that, but they are comments you made.

Samantha PAGE: COVID did seem to exacerbate workforce shortages. We heard much more from employers having difficulty staffing services post COVID. I am not quite sure what caused that. Did we lose a lot of good educators, or did people find alternative employment? I do not know exactly what the mechanisms were, but we certainly have heard that the workforce shortages have been exacerbated post COVID.

The problems with the quality of qualifications tends to be in a lot of the online qualification providers, which tend to operate at a national rather than a state level. So it is difficult for me to disaggregate whether the problems are higher in Victoria or in other states and territories. But we did have ACECQA cancel the qualifications issued by two large online RTOs. I want to say that was about two years ago; I can check that timeline for you. That did impact on a number of educators. I know a service in regional Victoria that was not able to open because the qualifications of its diploma-qualified staff were cancelled. They had to start that qualification again. There have been sector concerns about the quality of some RTOs for some time. As I said, I do think that ACECQA, as the regulator for registered training organisations, has been more active in the last few years in that space and has been trying to shut down RTOs that are not issuing qualifications of an appropriate quality.

Georgie CROZIER: Thank you very much. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Dr Mansfield.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Thank you. Thank you for appearing today. In your submission you have proposed developing a provider commitment and potential renegotiating of the sector by government to determine who might remain or enter the system. Can you expand on that and why you have made that suggestion?

Samantha PAGE: Yes. We have been talking for a while about the transition from a free market delivery of early childhood, which is no different to the free market delivery of retail goods or other services. It is hard for people to really appreciate that there has been no intervention in terms of where services are delivered or who is providing those services. The entry bar for providers has been, historically, quite low. It is a bit tighter now, and there are more requirements on owners and operators. But in the past it has been quite low, which has meant you have had a very broad diversity of providers operating services that they have decided are needed in any particular community. We are moving from that free market approach to more of a social market planned approach to where services are needed, what types of services are delivered and who can be an operator who can deliver those services, including, as I said, quality private providers. In that transition we were thinking: what would demonstrate that a provider is meeting the now paramount consideration of the best interests of children now in the national law? What would that look like within an organisation? Within any provider, how would they demonstrate that they are giving paramount consideration to children's rights and best interests? That was the list of evidence, if you like, that we came up with, in terms of what that would look like. So if we were looking at a provider and determining whether they were implementing the paramount consideration, we would look for those 10 things. Some of them, as I said before, are easier to implement than others. But we

think it is a worthy starting point for a discussion about what government might require of providers in the future which it has not required in the past.

Sarah MANSFIELD: In terms of that oversight and service planning and regulation, do you see it as the state government's role to be managing that in Victoria?

Samantha PAGE: I think we need a new approach. We have supported calls for an early childhood commission to take on that stewardship role, but that could be one national commission or it could be a system of commissions that operate at state and territory levels. It could be a role that existing regulatory authorities evolve to take, but they would need to be resourced to do that. So we do not have one fixed model in mind, to answer you honestly, and we do think that that function needs to be done and needs to be added into the system.

Sarah MANSFIELD: You said we are in the transition phase, but at the moment anyone can still go and start up a childcare centre. Is that the reality?

Samantha PAGE: That is right; that is the reality, and if that area is already oversupplied and a new provider comes in, it just disrupts the workforce. It means that we have got people spread over too many services. We have got all services operating below their viable level often, with too low utilisation to be financially viable, and that does not improve quality. That detracts from quality.

Sarah MANSFIELD: In terms of staffing, you have mentioned a number of issues. In your submission you talk about the tension if there is a concern raised about a child safety concern or issues related to an employee's conduct. Sometimes providers feel stuck between their obligations under Fair Work, being caught up with some unproven allegation and child safety. Where do you feel the balance is sitting at the moment?

Samantha PAGE: I think we definitely need more work in this area, because I do think it is a dilemma that I have heard a lot of employers talk about. If an educator's behaviour is crossing professional boundaries – they are showing signs that could be early signs of grooming, for example, with a family – is that sufficient to take disciplinary action and to ultimately dismiss that employee? Many employers feel like it is not, and they are caught wanting to improve the safety and wanting to protect the child and the family but also not wanting to end up in an unfair dismissal situation with Fair Work. That is where we have seen a number of employers entering in non-disclosure agreements with employees, which is really problematic because then that employee can go and just get a job down the road and there is no negative impact on them. So I do think we need to have a conversation with the regulatory authorities, the employers and the Fair Work Commission about how we navigate this space, particularly in relation to child safety and safeguarding, and give employers the authority they need to safeguard children without breaching their obligations as an employer.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Do you think that may contribute to situations where, say, even within the same service an employee might be shuffled around to a different part of the service or different rooms, again in recognition that there has obviously been some sort of risk but not wanting to fall foul of those worker protections?

Samantha PAGE: Yes, possibly, and also in situations where there may be an active police investigation happening and the employee may be stood down. But for a smaller service the financial impact of that is quite significant, to continue to pay a salary while potentially quite a long investigation is happening. These are some of the tensions in child safeguarding that we need to address.

Sarah MANSFIELD: You also discussed the issue of CCTV in your submission and indicated that it is not a solution in and of itself. We had a provider earlier at pains to really emphasise that CCTV is being rolled out in all the centres and it is a big part of their response to some of the awful incidents that have occurred and become public. Why do you feel that CCTV is not necessarily an answer in and of itself?

Samantha PAGE: Initially we were really concerned about CCTV being seen as a solution because we have seen CCTV fail in other ways. For example, CCTV was introduced into a lot of nursery rooms, particularly in the UK, to monitor babies that are sleeping. It does not do a good job of monitoring babies that are sleeping. Human beings need to monitor babies when they are sleeping. You need to go in and check their temperature and hear them breathing, and just watching on a CCTV screen does not give you the same level of safety. We saw that in the UK where we had children unfortunately be very ill and it not being picked up on the CCTV. So we were concerned that introducing CCTV on a broad scale in Australia could potentially breed

complacency or lower staff-to-child ratios than we would recommend because there is a CCTV camera. There is no evidence that I am aware of that CCTV has a strong preventative influence or evidence of effectiveness as a strong preventative strategy. Now, I have tempered that opinion from providers who have talked about the value in CCTV in terms of resolving discrepancies, differences in opinion or different recordings of people's accounts of a particular situation or what might have happened. Also, just in terms of making sure that they do have adequate staffing, that there is good supervision of children, CCTV can play quite a proactive role in that. So we are more neutral on CCTV now than perhaps we were initially and not quite as concerned about it, but it does need to be used very thoughtfully and carefully and not allow for complacency in staffing and child supervision. We are looking for research in that space to provide really clear guidance and evidence on how CCTV can be used well and appropriately and how it can enhance child safety, avoiding the problems we have seen in other areas of it having a detrimental impact.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Ms Bath.

Melina BATH: Thanks very much, Chair. Thank you very much, Ms Page, for being here today. Can you just unpack Early Childhood Australia? You are a peak body. Who is in your peak body? Do you have RTOs? Do you have TAFEs? Do you have private? Do you have not-for-profit? Paint me that picture so we can understand where you come from.

Samantha PAGE: I would be very happy to do that. We have individual membership, which tends to be early childhood educators, teachers, service leaders, some child and maternal health nurses and some family support workers – people who predominantly work with young children. We then have organisational membership. The large majority of organisations that are members of ECA are early childhood services, so preschool, long day care, family day care, outside-school-hours care, in-home care providers and schools. We have a lot of primary schools that are part of our membership, including Catholic and independent and public schools, because we are birth to eight, so we include the foundation year and years 1 and 2. So schools are an important part of our membership. Then we have institutional membership, which includes universities and RTOs. The universities are often initial teacher education university providers. RTOs usually have cert III or diploma in their scope. We have individual academics as well. So it is quite a diverse membership.

Melina BATH: Thank you very much for painting that picture. In your submission you talk about the concern about the quality of training and talk about poor-quality RTOs. I am interested to understand too: have you applied a lens to training in our TAFE sector in Victoria and how that trains this sector of workforce?

Samantha PAGE: I am not quite sure what your –

Melina BATH: You talk about poor-quality RTOs. Have you looked at TAFEs with the same lens?

Samantha PAGE: Generally speaking, TAFEs are seen as a good-quality provider of training, but I personally have not reviewed the quality of TAFEs or any other RTOs in Victoria or nationally. Our work is more in a policy space, working with ASQA and government. We support, for example, the South Australian TAFE centre of excellence. We have those kinds of relationships. We are not reviewing individual providers.

Melina BATH: There was some commentary around poor quality of RTOs in your submission. I think it tends to be more of a general sense. Is that what I am getting from here?

Samantha PAGE: Yes.

Melina BATH: Thank you. Can you talk about pathways to higher degrees, so from the VET sector on through university? Ultimately where my questioning is going is: we want high-quality individuals working in centres, whether they be not for profit, public or private. How can this state government, through our recommendations, better support that pipeline of workforce?

Samantha PAGE: We have talked in the past about the early childhood sector as a major channel of people who eventually undertake teaching degrees, often starting with a competency-based qualification, certificate or diploma and then moving on to a tertiary qualification, usually a teaching degree. That is quite a common pathway. There have been in recent years lower enrolments in the diploma qualification, which is concerning,

so there have been conversations with training providers, state government and federal government about how we improve the entry pathway to the diploma qualification, because that is a major source of teacher trainees or teaching students. That is one way. I think there is also the articulation, the workforce planning and workforce support that looks at what are career pathways and how we keep good teachers still working with children rather than moving into management roles or moving away from teaching. That is a very live conversation in the sector at the moment and one that state government has a really important role in. Of course how we support one of the challenges of getting people over the final line for qualifications is the practicum placements and the complexities of that, particularly in the context of the child safety and safeguarding conversations, because providers are getting more reluctant to take students on placement. So how do we navigate that? We do not want to not stop ourselves from getting people qualified because they cannot do their practicum or there is a lack of support for practicum placements.

Melina BATH: Thank you. I appreciate that. If you have any recommendations for us either now in my last couple of minutes or in the future, please feel free to drop that one back. You had a survey that your respondents replied to, and it says 62 per cent of respondents believe that there is not sufficient oversight by the Department of Education in maintaining child safety. We have had child safety standards now for 10 years in Victoria. What do you see as the critical gaps in the Department of Education in terms of oversight, and what changes need to happen?

Samantha PAGE: I was disappointed with that number. I think what education teams would really benefit from is a mapping of the national quality framework and the Child Safe Standards and an integration of that, with more resources. There is also a big call for free, high-quality professional learning. The sector is really hungry for that, and I think some of that is the changing landscape, like some of the risks that have emerged from particular cases of child sexual abuse in particular have rich learnings for everyone else working in the early childhood sector. But have we translated that into professional learning that everyone can access? Are we talking enough about what grooming looks like and what crossing professional boundaries looks like? Are we talking about how to respond to that? Are we talking about two eyes on children at all times? What does that mean? What is dynamic supervision? How do we support that in practice every day? I think that is what the sector is looking for.

Melina BATH: Thank you – very, very important.

Samantha PAGE: I am not sure if I am verballing them – if they mean something else by ‘oversight’ – but that is what we are seeing in terms of demand for resources.

Melina BATH: So tragic and highly concerning and distressing situations occur, and it is imperative that there are lessons not just learned in a superficial phase but actually drilled down centre by centre, staff by staff. Is that kind of what you are suggesting?

Samantha PAGE: Yes.

Melina BATH: Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Bath. I am now going to hand over to Mr Galea in place of Ms Ermacora.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Chair. Thank you again, Ms Page. I would just like to continue the line of thought we were going down between you and Dr Mansfield in relation to CCTV. I was quite interested in your UK example of how it was being misused and leading to serious failures. Was CCTV implemented in the UK for the same purposes that Australia is now looking at it – for that prevention of abuse – or was it implemented specifically for everyday routine supervision of children?

Samantha PAGE: I am not a policy expert in the UK, but my belief is that it was part of routine care for children and it was not meant to replace physical supervision and checking of children. But it did, unfortunately, have that impact in some cases from what I can tell from what I have heard of coroners’ reports and situations that have occurred.

Michael GALEA: So it was sort of through scope creep that those problems started to emerge, and that is something that we should clearly be vigilant of in Victoria and across Australia as CCTV is rolled out further.

Samantha PAGE: Yes.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. This is touched on at a few points in the rapid review as well in terms of how staff can be comfortable and safe to make reports. Particularly when you have extenuating circumstances such as a very close-knit team or particularly possibly in a small regional town, what more can we be doing to make those staff feel comfortable? Or what other pathways do we need to be providing to ensure that we are not missing reports where they need to be made?

Samantha PAGE: I think supporting providers to develop a reporting culture within their service and within their team is really important, and part of that is about ensuring that it is not always a negative response to reporting. There are professional learning opportunities or there are discussions and there is some benefit to the whole education team feeling like they are doing high-quality work that is seen and recognised and rewarded from reporting. We need to encourage reporting as a positive as well as a safety or safeguarding measure. I think we need to be cautious about the imposition of fines and negative consequences on individuals that might discourage that, particularly, as you say, in teams where people are friends or people are neighbours. We need to try and make sure that the consequences are not acting to discourage reporting rather than encourage reporting. I am asked all the time in the media about whether the increase in reporting of incidents means that quality has declined or that children are more at risk, and that actually is not the case. Good reporting, frequent reporting, is often an indicator of higher quality and better safety. What we need to look at is when reporting is linked to poor practice. That is a much smaller proportion than the number of reports overall, but we should be monitoring that very carefully.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. The rapid review also called out the need for more support for parents and guardians to raise concerns and complaints when they are concerned an issue has arisen. What do you think is the best way – and there are certain things that the government has also committed to as part of its response – to empower parents to be appropriately engaged, informed and empowered to make those reports when they need to?

Samantha PAGE: I do think we could do more to inform parents and to encourage them to raise concerns. Part of this is about feeling secure in their access to services, so not feeling like they are at risk of losing their place at the service or that they are back on a waiting list, that kind of scenario. We have a complexity of oversupply and undersupply at the same time in the early childhood system, because there can be oversupply in terms of the number of services and the number of places overall but undersupply for particular age groups, particularly infants. Often parents feel lucky to get a spot and at risk if they make any trouble or ask too many questions, and we really need to try and, at a systems level, address that and give parents the confidence and the security to raise concerns or raise suggestions or ask questions as appropriate. I think we often promote good educators and good teachers into positions of management without giving them any management training or complaints handling training – how to answer questions without taking it personally. These are skills that managers need to learn, and I think we do need to invest more in management and leadership training for people in the early childhood sector that are promoted, often out of teaching roles or education roles, into management positions. Then I also think we should have other mechanisms so if a parent really is not satisfied with the answers or the response to a complaint at the service level they can go to the regulator or they can go somewhere else to raise their concern.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Ms Page. That is all I have.

The CHAIR: Thank you. That brings our session to a conclusion. Ms Page, thank you for your evidence today to the committee – we really appreciate it – 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 requests from colleagues and members of the committee for you to take on notice.

I would now like to bring this session to a close, and we will reset for the next witness at 2 o'clock.

Witness withdrew.